

**Draft
Environmental Assessment**

**Giant Springs State Park-
Heritage Park East Wildlife Habitat
Improvement**



12/30/2021

Draft Environmental Assessment CHECKLIST

PART I. PROPOSED ACTION DESCRIPTION

1. **Type of proposed state action:** Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks in collaboration with NorthWestern Energy and the Upper Missouri River Breaks Audubon Society proposes to improve park character and wildlife habitat in Giant Springs State Park. The project would include planting approximately 700 trees in an undeveloped portion of land adjacent to Heritage Park. A temporary fence and irrigation system would be installed to help the trees develop to a mature stage.
2. **Agency authority for the proposed action:** Montana state statute 23-1-102 authorizes the department to make a study to determine the scenic, historic, archaeological, scientific, and recreational resources of the state. The department may by purchase, lease, agreement, or acceptance of donations acquire for the state any areas, sites, or objects that in its opinion should be held, improved, and maintained as state parks, state recreational areas, state monuments, or state historical sites.

Furthermore, state statute 23-1-110 and Administrative Rule 12.2.433 guides public involvement and comment for the improvements at state parks and fishing access sites, which this document provides.

3. **Name, address and phone number of project sponsor (if other than the agency)**

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
4600 Giant Springs Road
Great Falls, MT 59405
406-454-5840

NorthWestern Energy
6700 Rainbow Dam Road
Great Falls, MT 59404
406-268-2299

Upper Missouri Breaks Audubon Society
PO Box 2362
Great Falls, MT 59403
umbaudubon@gmail.com

4. **Anticipated Schedule:**
Estimated Construction Commencement Date: As early as February 2022
Estimated Completion Date: May 2022
Current Status of Project Design (% complete): 100%

5. **Location affected by proposed action (county, range and township – included map):**
Section 33 T21N R4E



6. **Project size -- estimate the number of acres that would be directly affected that are currently:**

	<u>Acres</u>		<u>Acres</u>
(a) Developed:		(d) Floodplain	<u>0</u>
Residential	<u>0</u>		
Industrial	<u>0</u>	(e) Productive:	
(existing shop area)		Irrigated cropland	<u>0</u>
(b) Open Space/	<u>8</u>	Dry cropland	<u>0</u>
Woodlands/Recreation		Forestry	<u>0</u>
(c) Wetlands/Riparian	<u>0</u>	Rangeland	<u>0</u>
Areas		Other	<u>0</u>

7. **Permits, Funding & Overlapping Jurisdiction.**

- (a) **Permits:** permits will be filed at least 2 weeks prior to project start.

<u>Agency Name</u>	<u>Permits</u>
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- (b) **Funding:**

<u>Agency Name</u>	<u>Funding Amount</u>
NorthWestern Energy	\$70,043
Upper Missouri River Audubon Society	\$3,000
Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks	\$3,000

(c) **Other Overlapping or Additional Jurisdictional Responsibilities:**

<u>Agency Name</u>	<u>Type of Responsibility</u>
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8. **Narrative summary of the proposed action:** NorthWestern Energy approached Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks with the Heritage Park East Wildlife Habitat Improvement Project in mid-2021. As part of NorthWestern Energy's license to operate the Missouri River hydro power projects, they are required to mitigate impacts by enhancing native plants and wildlife populations and their habitats on the lands and waters associated with these projects. The focus of this project is to increase riparian vegetation and bird habitat. The Heritage Park area was selected because of its proximity to the Missouri River, the productivity of the neighboring Giant Springs and River's Edge Trail corridor as bird habitat, and an adjacent existing irrigation system. The area around Giant Springs proper is best described as high-density mature forest. Heritage Park is described as low-density maturing forest. The intent of this project is to develop a high-density forest in the Heritage Park area for both park character and wildlife habitat.

The project would encompass an 8-acre parcel of undeveloped land to the east of Heritage Park and will consist of planting approximately 700 trees. Roughly 80% would be cottonwood trees with the remaining being a mix of other native trees and bushes. A temporary large-scale wildlife exclusion fence would be installed around the perimeter of the site to protect against deer grazing. The existing irrigation system would be extended to the site to provide supplemental water during the high stress months, generally June to September. Once the trees are no longer vulnerable to wildlife grazing and their roots have developed enough to survive without supplemental water, the fence and the irrigation system would be removed. We estimate that this would take between 7 and 10 years. After that time, that area would be managed as a natural landscape.

9. **Description and analysis of reasonable alternatives:**

Alternative A: No Action

The no action alternative would leave the area as it is, an undeveloped section of open land. Impacts associated with the no action alternative would be missed opportunities to develop park character and improve wildlife habitat and include not increasing vegetation cover, quantity and quality, and not improving area aesthetics.

Alternative B: Proposed Action

The proposed action is to develop 8-acres of wildlife habitat including planting approximately 700 trees, building a temporary exclusion fence around the area and running irrigation to provide supplemental water. The intention is to remove the fence and the irrigation system after the trees are established, likely in 7-10 years.

10. **Evaluation and listing of mitigation, stipulation, or other control measures enforceable by the agency or another government agency:**

There are no formal stipulations of mitigation or other controls associated with the proposed action. This action does not involve any permits or granting of a license on which stipulations would be placed.

PART II. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW CHECKLIST

Evaluation of the impacts of the Proposed Action including secondary and cumulative impacts on the Physical and Human Environment.

A. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Will the proposed action result in potential impacts to:	Unknown	Potentially Significant	Minor	None	Can Be Mitigated	Comments Provided
1. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture				X		
2. Air quality or objectionable odors				X		
3. Water quality, quantity and distribution (surface or groundwater)				X		
4. Existing water right or reservation				X		A4 below
5. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality			X			A5 below
6. Unique, endangered, or fragile vegetative species				X		A6 below
7. Terrestrial or aquatic life and/or habitats				X		
8. Unique, endangered, or fragile wildlife or fisheries species				X		
9. Introduction of new species into an area				X		
10. Changes to abundance or movement of species			X			A10 below

A4 – The Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation Water Resources Division provides guidelines for stream and wetland restoration activities as they pertain to intentionally appropriating water for beneficial use. According to the guidance document, item 5 in the Stream Restoration Projects section, this project would qualify for temporary use of Missouri River water for irrigation for the first years after planting with the intention that the trees would at some point become naturally self-sustaining without irrigation. This project would use the existing irrigation system developed by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks for Giant Springs and Heritage Parks. The conveyance system would be temporarily expanded for this project. In addition to the guidance provided in the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation memo, NorthWestern Energy staff contacted Department of Natural Resources and Conservation staff [Scott Irvin, pers comm] in Lewistown to specifically discuss riparian cottonwood restorations like this and NorthWestern Energy was assured this project fits within the spirit of the guidelines.

A5 – Through planting approximately 700 trees, this project would increase the abundance of tall and medium height trees and shrubs at the site. Understanding that some plants may not survive to maturity, high density planting is intended to ensure a large number of trees and bushes become established. Trees and bushes could be thinned to ensure the density is not too high for natural growth and maturity. It is likely the existing grasses would initially increase in density from the irrigation component but would likely become less dense from shading by maturing trees. There would be soil and vegetation disturbance associated with the planting of the trees and the installation of the exclusion fence. Where necessary, areas would be seeded with a native seed mixture. Any impacts to vegetation from the construction component would be short term and minor. The project is intended to transition the landscape

from grass to trees/bushes, which is considered to be a desirable, beneficial impact in this location. The purpose of this project is to provide an overall increased benefit to park character and wildlife habitat.

A6 – The site is within the boundary of the previously-reclaimed Montana Silver Smelter. Vegetative cover is generally comprised of wheatgrasses used to stabilize soil at the site. The footprint of this project was selected specifically to avoid native vegetation such as Soapweed Yucca (*Yucca* spp.), Prickly Pear Cactus (*Opuntia* spp.), Blue Grama Grass (*Bouteloua* spp), and Little Blue Stem (*Schizachyrium* spp). The boundaries of the fence and tree planting would generally occur within the reclaimed area, and no populations of any unique, fragile, or endangered species are known or likely to exist in the project area.

A10 – As intended, with increased habitat, there is potential for changes in abundance and movement of birds in this area. We expect some species of prairie birds such as western meadowlark and horned lark may be displaced to adjacent prairie habitats as this site shifts from prairie to predominantly trees and shrubs. The displacement is expected to be relatively minor because suitable habitat is located several hundred feet from this project site. Likewise, a certain compliment of neotropical migrant birds are expected to pioneer the new tree/shrub habitat. As part of this project, NorthWestern Energy will contract with the University of Montana Bird Ecology lab for biennially bird surveys at site to measure changes in species and abundance. There may be increased use by porcupine and raccoon.

B. HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

Will the proposed action result in potential impacts to:	Unknown	Potentially Significant	Minor	None	Can Be Mitigated	Comments Provided
1. Noise and/or electrical effects				X		
2. Land use					X	B2 below
3. Risk and/or health hazards				X		
4. Community impact				X		
5. Public services/taxes/utilities				X		
6. Potential revenue and/or project maintenance costs			X			B6 below
7. Aesthetics and recreation			X			B7 below
8. Cultural and historic resources				X		B8 below
9. Evaluation of significance				X		
10. Generate public controversy				X		

B2 – We anticipate a slight increase of public use at the site after the fence is removed. Likely use would be for nature walks, human solitude and bird watching. Upper Missouri Breaks Audubon is one partner with this project and involved specifically to promote bird habitat improvement and the sport of bird watching. There is one pioneered trail along the north boundary that could result in a slight realignment by users. We don't anticipate this project conflicting with any existing land use activity. Prior to COVID 19 restrictions, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks would conduct hunter education shotgun live fire demonstrations near this site. Since COVID 19 restrictions, hunter education is conducted through an on-line course with no field component. If hunter education resumes to pre-COVID 19 methodologies, the shotgun live fire demonstrations may occur at this site again in the future.

B6 – There would be increased maintenance costs associated with this project in the short term. The cost increases would be associated with the irrigation system. NorthWestern Energy and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks estimate that a dedicated maintenance fund and existing budgets would cover any future expenses. In the long term, the area is expected to be managed as natural landscape so maintenance costs would be minimal.

B7 – This project would positively impact area aesthetics. The project area is located adjacent to a Fish, Wildlife & Parks Region 4 storage area. The project would improve the area view scape by concealing the storage area from portions of Heritage Park and the River's Edge Trail. It would also increase the character of the area and wildlife habitat through another high-density forest.

B8 – NorthWestern Energy's consulting archaeologists have reviewed the files for this site. This specific site is situated at the reclaimed ruins of the Montana Smelter which was built in 1888 to process silver ore from Montana and surrounding states and Canadian provinces. It operated intermittently from January 1889 to 1901. In 2002 the site was surveyed by archaeologists in preparation for a Department of Environmental Quality remediation project. It was found to have little historic significance due to past demolitions and clean up. The only significant feature, the roaster stack, is protected by a large iron fence with interpretive signage. A Department of Environmental Quality remediation project in the early 2000's was conducted and all cultural, historical and archaeological information from that process will be used to summarize the known resources at the site. Avoidance methods and likely impacts from installing a fence at the site will be evaluated by the NorthWestern Energy consulting archaeologists, a report and recommendation prepared, and NorthWestern Energy will file a report with State Historic Preservation Office and obtain a letter of concurrence that will be provided to NorthWestern Energy and Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

PART III. NARRATIVE EVALUATION AND COMMENT

All anticipated impacts associated with the proposed action are minor and the majority would be considered positive. This project represents an opportunity for Fish, Wildlife & Parks to partner with multiple groups to reestablish cottonwoods along the Missouri River and provide new wildlife habitat.

PART IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

1. Public involvement:

The public will be notified in the following manners to comment on this current EA, the proposed action and alternatives:

- Two public notices in each of these papers: The Independent Record (Helena) and the Great Falls Tribune
- One statewide press release (if applicable);
- Public notice on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page: <https://fwp.mt.gov/>

Copies of this environmental assessment will be distributed to the neighboring landowners and interested parties to ensure their knowledge of the proposed project.

This level of public notice and participation is appropriate for a project of this scope having limited impacts, many of which can be mitigated.

2. Duration of comment period:

The public comment period will extend for (30) thirty days following the publication of the second legal notice in area newspapers. Written comments will be accepted until 5:00 p.m., February 3rd, 2022, and can be mailed or emailed to the address below:

Mt. Fish, Wildlife, and Parks,
4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, Mt., 59405
Attn. Alex Sholes
E mail- alex.sholes@mt.gov

PART V. EA PREPARATION

- 1. Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? (YES/NO)?**
If an EIS is not required, explain why the EA is the appropriate level of analysis for this proposed action.
No
- 2. Person(s) responsible for preparing the EA:** Alex Sholes, Giant Springs State Park Manager, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
- 3. List of agencies or offices consulted during preparation of the EA:** Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks