

CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name:	InterBel Buried Fiberoptic 2025
Proposed Implementation Date:	May 2025 – November 2026
Proponent:	InterBel Telephone Cooperative, Inc.
Location:	S7 T32N R23W-Hwy 93/Olney Loop, S14 T31N R24W-Star Meadows Rd, S17 T32N R23W-Hwy 93, S17/20/21 T32N R23W-Lupfer Rd, S18 T32N R23W-Good Creek Rd/Martin Camp Rd/Olney Loop Rd, S35 T32N R23W-Lupfer Loop Rd, S34 T32N R23W-Lupfer Loop Rd, S34 T32N R23W-Lupfer Loop Rd, S33 T32N R23W-Martin Camp Rd, S30 T33 R23W-Hwy 93, S32 T33N R23W-Running Dog Rd, S23 T33N R24W-Radnor Rd S18 T32N R23W-Stillwater River-from Martin Camp Rd to Olney Loop Rd S18 T32N R23W-Stillwater River-Good Creek Rd-near Hwy 93
County:	Flathead

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

InterBel Telephone Cooperative, Inc. (InterBel) is proposing to install new underground fiberoptic telecommunications cable. InterBel is locating facilities along existing public and state roadways. InterBel submitted 25 applications for utility easements from DNRC to install fiberoptic within the road right of way, leased state land, and under navigable waters of the Stillwater River. The estimated encumbered acreage is 17.65 acres.

The lands involved in this proposed project are held by the State of Montana in trust for MSU Morrill, State Normal School, Montana Tech, School for the Deaf & Blind, Common Schools, and Public Buildings trusts per the Enabling Act of February 22, 1889; 1972 Montana Constitution, Article X, Section 11. The Board of Land Commissioners and DNRC are required by law to administer these trust lands to produce the largest measure of reasonable and legitimate return over the long run for the beneficiary institutions (Section 77-1-202, MCA).

II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

1. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, AGENCIES, GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS CONTACTED:

Provide a brief chronology of the scoping and ongoing involvement for this project. List number of individuals contacted, number of responses received, and newspapers in which notices were placed and for how long. Briefly summarize issues received from the public.

57 scoping letters were mailed to private property owners and DNRC Lessees dated March 14, 2025 and April 2, 2025. Recipients of these letters were chosen due to proximity to the project as landowners or DNRC Lessees.

Although the impacts from this project are anticipated to be minimal, a possibility of short-term visual and audible impacts from seeing and hearing the construction process exists. This letter described where the utilities would be located, the projected dates of the project, the process in which construction would take place, and that there would be no cost to the landowners or Lessees.

InterBel was responsible for offering, delivering, and receiving *Notice of Settlement of Damages* form. For the Navigable Waters portion of the project, InterBel met Flathead Conservation Districts requirements and received an approved 310 Permit. Additionally, the Army Corps of Engineers were also consulted for all Stillwater River

crossings. They responded with a No Permit Required (NPR) letter based on the horizontal directional boring crossing methodology.

One question was received via phone message to DNRC from this project on March 20, 2025 asking what the cost would be. This inquiry was responded to with a phone call/voice message confirming there would be no cost and further questions could be sent to Dan Dobbins at the Stillwater Unit DNRC or Andy Escobar at InterBel.

2. OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES WITH JURISDICTION, LIST OF PERMITS NEEDED:

Examples: cost-share agreement with U.S. Forest Service, 124 Permit, 3A Authorization, Air Quality Major Open Burning Permit.

For the Navigable Waters portion of the project, InterBel met Flathead Conservation Districts requirements and received an approved 310 Permit. Additionally, the Army Corps of Engineers were also consulted for all Stillwater River crossings. They also responded with a No Permit Required (NPR) letter based on the horizontal directional boring crossing methodology.

3. ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT:

Describe alternatives considered and, if applicable, provide brief description of how the alternatives were developed. List alternatives that were considered but eliminated from further analysis and why.

No-Action Alternative A

No-Action Alternative would deny this easement application.

Action Alternative B

Action Alternative would recommend Land Board approval of this easement to InterBel.

III. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.</i>• <i>Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.</i>• <i>Enter "NONE" if no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.</i> |
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4. GEOLOGY AND SOIL QUALITY, STABILITY AND MOISTURE:

Consider the presence of fragile, compactable or unstable soils. Identify unusual geologic features. Specify any special reclamation considerations. Identify direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to soils.

Soils and Geology Existing Conditions

The geology, landform and parent materials in the project area are generally quartzite and argillite bedrock soils with small areas of glacial till or glacial drift influence. Volcanic ash surface layers are common, especially on northern aspects. The majority of the bedrock consists of slightly metamorphosed sedimentary rocks formed from sand, silt, clay, and carbonate materials deposited in an ancient shallow sea during the Precambrian period.

Most of the proposed project is located within the existing right-of-way of roads. These areas have already been disturbed from a natural setting by road construction and management issues. Most areas disturbed for road construction have received mitigation measures to reduce soil erosion

Soils and Geology Direct, Indirect and Cumulative Impacts

No measurable direct, indirect or cumulative impacts to soil resources would be anticipated from proposed activities. The 17.65 acres of proposed cable burial would generate minimal soil disturbance. Provided all disturbed sites are seeded with Stillwater Mix grass seed concurrent with activities, no measurable soil erosion or deposition are expected.

5. WATER QUALITY, QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION:

Identify important surface or groundwater resources. Consider the potential for violation of ambient water quality standards, drinking water maximum contaminant levels, or degradation of water quality. Identify direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to water resources.

Water Quality, Quantity and Distribution Existing Conditions

None of the streams in the proposed project area are currently listed as water-quality-limited waterbodies in the 2020 Montana 303(d) list (DEQ, 2020). Reaches of the Stillwater River adjacent to portions of the proposed project area are listed as not fully supporting aquatic life. Probable causes are listed as Alteration in stream-side or littoral vegetative covers (with probable sources listed as Site Clearance (Land Development or Redevelopment), Agriculture, Loss of Riparian Habitat); and Sedimentation-Siltation (with probable sources listed as Loss of Riparian Habitat, Site Clearance (Land Development or Redevelopment), Upstream Source). A total maximum daily load (TMDL) has been developed, but these are the issues that still persist in this river system. DNRC is an active partner and participant in this process. All proposed activities within the Project Area would implement activities to alleviate identified sources of sediment and comply fully with all TMDL requirements.

No unstable or actively eroding stream or river reaches were identified by DNRC hydrologists during recent analysis within and near the proposed project area.

The project contains two applications that require InterBel to cross underneath the Stillwater River. These crossings are planned for horizontal directional boring. Per the requirements of the approved 310 permit from the Flathead Conservation District, they will utilize a minimum crossing depth of 5' under the riverbed with a minimum setback of 20 feet from the riverbanks. This allows the crossing to take place with no disturbance to the riverbanks or riverbed and mitigates sediment discharge in the river. Additionally, the Army Corps of Engineers were also consulted for these Stillwater River crossings. They responded with a No Permit Required (NPR) letter based on the horizontal directional boring crossing methodology.

Water Quality, Quantity and Distribution Direct, Indirect and Cumulative Impacts

There is a low risk of measurable impacts to water quality from the proposed project. Small areas of ground-disturbing activities near streams could generate low levels of bare soil. There is a low risk that this could lead to sediment delivery.

No measurable impacts would be anticipated to groundwater resources.

Water Quality, Quantity and Distribution Mitigation Measures:

- Keep all cable plow, directional boring and bore-waste a minimum of 50 feet from streams to minimize the risk of fine sediment delivery to streams
- Seed all disturbed areas (cable plow and bore-waste) with Stillwater Mix grass seed concurrent with activities to reduce exposure of bare soil and subsequent sediment delivery
- Identify all small stream or drainage crossings that may not appear on maps to ensure all streams have proper mitigations for erosion and sediment delivery
- Agree to a contingency plan should small streams or drainages (anything with a definable bank or scoured bottom) appear in the planned route along roadways. The DNRC will require notification and compliance regarding how these unanticipated crossings are navigated.

6. AIR QUALITY:

What pollutants or particulate would be produced (i.e. particulate matter from road use or harvesting, slash pile burning, prescribed burning, etc)? Identify the Airshed and Impact Zone (if any) according to the Montana/Idaho Airshed Group. Identify direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to air quality.

No measurable impacts would be anticipated.

7. VEGETATION COVER, QUANTITY AND QUALITY:

What changes would the action cause to vegetative communities? Consider rare plants or cover types that would be affected. Identify direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to vegetation.

A minor amount of vegetation may be slightly disturbed by equipment during installation. No measurable impact would be anticipated; however, any disturbed areas will be grass seeded immediately with an annual Rye blend following installation. Disturbances to vegetation cover, quantity and quality will be localized near the roadway and of short duration.

8. TERRESTRIAL, AVIAN AND AQUATIC LIFE AND HABITATS:

Consider substantial habitat values and use of the area by wildlife, birds or fish. Identify direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to fish and wildlife.

Fisheries Existing Conditions

The Stillwater River is habitat for a population of bull trout, and several perennial tributaries to the Stillwater River are habitat for a population of westslope cutthroat trout. The US Fish and Wildlife Service has listed bull trout as 'threatened' under the Endangered Species Act. Both bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout are listed as S2 Montana Animal Species of Concern. Species classified as S2 are considered to be at risk due to very limited and/or potentially declining population numbers, range, and/or habitat, making the species vulnerable to global extinction or extirpation in the state (Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Montana Natural Heritage Program, and Montana Chapter American Fisheries Society Rankings). DNRC has also identified bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout as sensitive species (ARM 36.11.436).

DNRC is a cooperator and signatory to the following relevant agreements: Restoration Plan for Bull Trout in the Clark Fork River Basin and the Kootenai River Basin, Montana (2000), Memorandum of Understanding (2005) for the Swan Valley Bull Trout Work Group, and Memorandum of Understanding and Conservation Agreement for Westslope Cutthroat Trout and Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout in Montana (2007). All 3 agreements contain land management conservation strategies or action items utilized by DNRC as decision-making tools.

Fisheries Direct, Indirect and Cumulative Impacts

There is a low risk of direct, indirect, or cumulative impacts to fish populations or fish habitat from the proposed project. All proposed activities would be kept a minimum of 50 feet away from streams, and all bare soil would be promptly seeded with a cover mix. All proposed directional boring would occur approximately 5 feet below the bed of all streams and rivers. There is a very low risk of riverbed or streambed degradation from these activities. As a result, there would be a minimal risk of impacts to fish populations or habitat, provided the mitigation measures below are implemented.

Fisheries Mitigations:

- Keep all cable plow, directional boring and bore-waste a minimum of 50 feet from streams to minimize the risk of fine sediment delivery to streams

- Seed all disturbed areas (cable plow and bore-waste) with Annual Rye Blend grass seed concurrent with activities to reduce exposure of bare soil and subsequent sediment delivery

9. UNIQUE, ENDANGERED, FRAGILE OR LIMITED ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES:

Consider any federally listed threatened or endangered species or habitat identified in the project area. Determine effects to wetlands. Consider Sensitive Species or Species of special concern. Identify direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to these species and their habitat.

Terrestrial habitat would not be measurably altered, therefore no adverse impacts to wildlife are anticipated.

Wildlife Mitigations:

If a threatened or endangered species is encountered, consult a DNRC biologist immediately. Similarly, if undocumented nesting raptors are encountered within ½ mile of the Project Area, contact a DNRC biologist.

Ensure that all food, garbage, and other attractants (e.g., petroleum products) are cleaned up and stored in a bear-resistant manner.

10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:

Identify and determine direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to historical, archaeological or paleontological resources.

A Class I (literature review) level review was conducted by the DNRC staff archaeologist for the area of potential effect (APE). This entailed inspection of project maps, DNRC's sites/site leads database, land use records, General Land Office Survey Plats, and control cards. The Class I search results revealed that no cultural or paleontological resources have been identified in the APE, but portions of the APE have been inventoried to Class III standards.

Proposed telecommunications installation is expected to have *No Effect to Antiquities*. No additional archaeological investigative work will be conducted in response to this proposed development. However, if previously unknown cultural or paleontological materials are identified during project related activities, all work will cease until a professional assessment of such resources can be made.

11. AESTHETICS:

Determine if the project is located on a prominent topographic feature, or may be visible from populated or scenic areas. What level of noise, light or visual change would be produced? Identify direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to aesthetics.

There will not be any long duration adverse effects to the aesthetics of the landscape for this project. The only aesthetic damage will occur during construction and be short duration.

12. DEMANDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES OF LAND, WATER, AIR OR ENERGY:

Determine the amount of limited resources the project would require. Identify other activities nearby that the project would affect. Identify direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to environmental resources.

No demands on environmental resources of land, water, air or energy.

13. OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENTS PERTINENT TO THE AREA:

List other studies, plans or projects on this tract. Determine cumulative impacts likely to occur as a result of current private, state or federal actions in the analysis area, and from future proposed state actions in the analysis area that are under MEPA review (scoped) or permitting review by any state agency.

Olney fire reduction project being planned for summer 2025. No impacts likely to occur to Olney fire reduction project. No future anticipated impacts to state or federal actions in the analysis area.

IV. IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.• Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.• Enter "NONE" if no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.

14. HUMAN HEALTH AND SAFETY:

Identify any health and safety risks posed by the project.

None. No Human health or safety risks.

15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:

Identify how the project would add to or alter these activities.

None. No negative impacts as a result of this project.

16. QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYMENT:

Estimate the number of jobs the project would create, move or eliminate. Identify direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to the employment market.

No jobs added, moved or eliminated. No direct increase in employment. Possible indirect increase in employment due to enhanced internet connection and communication infrastructure.

17. LOCAL AND STATE TAX BASE AND TAX REVENUES:

Estimate tax revenue the project would create or eliminate. Identify direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to taxes and revenue.

No change from existing conditions would be anticipated.

18. DEMAND FOR GOVERNMENT SERVICES:

Estimate increases in traffic and changes to traffic patterns. What changes would be needed to fire protection, police, schools, etc.? Identify direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of this and other projects on government services

None. No anticipated closures of roads or altering of traffic patterns.

19. LOCALLY ADOPTED ENVIRONMENTAL PLANS AND GOALS:

List State, County, City, USFS, BLM, Tribal, and other zoning or management plans, and identify how they would affect this project.

No State, County, City, USFS, BLM, Tribal, and other zoning or management plans will affect this project.

20. ACCESS TO AND QUALITY OF RECREATIONAL AND WILDERNESS ACTIVITIES:

Identify any wilderness or recreational areas nearby or access routes through this tract. Determine the effects of the project on recreational potential within the tract. Identify direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to recreational and wilderness activities.

No restricted access or diminished quality of recreational and wilderness activities.

21. DENSITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION AND HOUSING:

Estimate population changes and additional housing the project would require. Identify direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to population and housing.

No effects on population density or additional housing projects. In the future it may make living in this rural community more enticing due to fiberoptic connections.

22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES:

Identify potential disruption of native or traditional lifestyles or communities.

No effects on native or traditional lifestyles.

23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY:

How would the action affect any unique quality of the area?

No effect on cultural uniqueness and diversity.

24. OTHER APPROPRIATE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES:

Estimate the return to the trust. Include appropriate economic analysis. Identify potential future uses for the analysis area other than existing management. Identify direct, indirect, and cumulative economic and social effects likely to occur as a result of the proposed action.

Granting the easement will generate \$132,076.00. Valuation was determined by Carmen Evans based on current market land values per acre. There is the possibility of future economic gains for the community due to the improvement in internet connectivity in this rural area.

EA Checklist Prepared By:	Name: Dan Dobbin	Date: 4/17/2025
	Title: Special Uses Program Manager	

V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

The Action Alternative (Alternative B) – recommending Land Board approval of the easement application.

26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

I find that Action Alternative B would not have measurable or significant impacts on the environment. Taken individually and cumulatively, the proposed activities are common practices.

27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

EIS

More Detailed EA

No Further Analysis

EA Checklist Approved By:	Name: Dave Ring
	Title: Stillwater Unit Manager
Signature: /s/ David A. Ring	Date: April 18, 2025