

# SEPA Environmental Checklist

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## Purpose of checklist

Governmental agencies use this checklist to help determine whether the environmental impacts of your proposal are significant. This information is also helpful to determine if available avoidance, minimization, or compensatory mitigation measures will address the probable significant impacts or if an environmental impact statement will be prepared to further analyze the proposal.

## Instructions for applicants

This environmental checklist asks you to describe some basic information about your proposal. Please answer each question accurately and carefully, to the best of your knowledge. You may need to consult with an agency specialist or private consultant for some questions. **You may use “not applicable” or “does not apply” only when you can explain why it does not apply and not when the answer is unknown.** You may also attach or incorporate by reference additional studies reports. Complete and accurate answers to these questions often avoid delays with the SEPA process as well as later in the decision-making process.

The checklist questions apply to **all parts of your proposal**, even if you plan to do them over a period of time or on different parcels of land. Attach any additional information that will help describe your proposal or its environmental effects. The agency to which you submit this checklist may ask you to explain your answers or provide additional information reasonably related to determining if there may be significant adverse impact.

## Instructions for lead agencies

Please adjust the format of this template as needed. Additional information may be necessary to evaluate the existing environment, all interrelated aspects of the proposal and an analysis of adverse impacts. The checklist is considered the first but not necessarily the only source of information needed to make an adequate threshold determination. Once a threshold determination is made, the lead agency is responsible for the completeness and accuracy of the checklist and other supporting documents.

# A. Background

**1. Name of proposed project, if applicable:**

Pygmy Rabbit Habitat Enhancement

**2. Name of applicant:**

Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife

**3. Address and phone number of applicant and contact person:**

Applicant: Sidra Blake, Wildlife Area Assistant Manager

Douglas County WLA Complex

54 Moe Road,

Brewster, WA 98812

(509) 449-1557

**4. Date checklist prepared:**

11/30/2023

**5. Agency requesting checklist:**

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

**6. Proposed timing of schedule (including phasing, if applicable):**

Phase 1) Permitting and Pygmy rabbit winter surveys

Phase 2) Mowing 50 acres in Jan-March of 2024

Phase 3) Prescribed burn 100 acres March-May of 2024 or September 2024 through May of 2025.

Phase 4) Adaptive management that includes weed control and native seeding May 2024 through the grant end.

**7. Do you have any plans for future additions, expansion, or further activity related to or connected with this proposal? If yes, explain.**

Yes, this is an ongoing management need to address homogenous stands of even age mature sagebrush at risk for catastrophic fire. Management via mowing and prescription burn are the tools we can employ in order to diversify the sagebrush age structure and create more resilient habitat to catastrophic fire.

**8. List any environmental information you know about that has been prepared, or will be prepared, directly related to this proposal.**

Greater Sage-Grouse Recovery Plan

Recovery Plan for the Columbia Basin Distinct Population Segment of the Pygmy Rabbit  
Sagebrush Flat Wildlife Area Management Plan

**9. Do you know whether applications are pending for governmental approvals of other proposals directly affecting the property covered by your proposal? If yes, explain.**

None known.

**10. List any government approvals or permits that will be needed for your proposal, if known.**

Cultural Resource consultation

Burn Permit

**11. Give brief, complete description of your proposal, including the proposed uses and the size of the project and site. There are several questions later in this checklist that ask you to describe certain aspects of your proposal. You do not need to repeat those answers on this page. (Lead agencies may modify this form to include additional specific information on project description.)**

WDFW proposes to enhance 150 acres of shrub steppe habitat within the Sagebrush Flat Unit (herein unit) of the Sagebrush Flat Wildlife Area in southern Douglas County. Sagebrush Flat Wildlife Area is managed to promote the recovery of three listed species including the federally listed Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit, state listed sage grouse and sharp-tailed grouse. Areas occupied by rabbits will be determined and avoided using winter occupancy surveys. The department will employ a combination of land management strategies including mowing, invasive plant control, native bunchgrass seeding, and prescribed burning. We will use standard farming tools which include tractors, mowers, side by sides, heavy harrow, and broadcast seeders. Fifty acres will be mowed along a meandering path patch mosaic using a 12 foot skid steer with masticator implement that chops up woody debris, reducing the upper canopy fuel load while leaving the understory relatively undisturbed. Approximately 100 acres will undergo a low intensity prescription burn.

The unit's even-age mature sage coupled with climate forecasts, nearby housing development and agricultural practices present an increasing risk of high-intensity wildfires in a landscape that historically was more resilient to an uncommon fire. Without proactive intervention toward age diversification of sage and habitat enhancement targeting understory composition, pygmy rabbits at the unit face population setbacks and probable extirpation. We anticipate ongoing pursuits toward this moving target. Shrub steppe habitat will be the primary habitat enhanced in the aim toward a more resilient recovery zone for pygmy rabbit and for the benefit of other shrub steppe obligates and dependent species. Adaptive management will occur over the next two years and may include addressing potential flushes

of weedy annual grasses and broadleaf weeds using chemicals appropriate for that weed stage of development. If warranted, disturbed sites will be seeded with native bunchgrass species.

- 12. Location of the proposal. Give sufficient information for a person to understand the precise location of your proposed project, including a street address, if any, and section, township, and range, if known. If a proposal would occur over a range of area, provide the range or boundaries of the site(s). Provide a legal description, site plan, vicinity map, and topographic map, if reasonably available. While you should submit any plans required by the agency, you are not required to duplicate maps or detailed plans submitted with any permit applications related to this checklist.**

The project site is in southern Douglas County. The project will occur on Sagebrush Flat unit of the Sagebrush Flat Wildlife Area. Township 23N, Range 25E, Section 15,16, 21, 22, 27,28, and 34. Approximately 15 miles northwest of Ephrata, WA accessible east of Sagebrush Flat Rd and north of 12<sup>th</sup> Rd SE.

## **B.Environmental Elements**

### **1. Earth**

- a. **General description of the site:** The site is predominately flat with evidence of glacial derived outwashes and or gullies.

Circle or highlight one:  Flat, rolling, hilly, steep slopes, mountainous, other:

- b. **What is the steepest slope on the site (approximate percent slope)?** The topography is relatively flat averaging less than 10%.
- c. **What general types of soils are found on the site (for example, clay, sand, gravel, peat, muck)? If you know the classification of agricultural soils, specify them, and note any agricultural land of long-term commercial significance and whether the proposal results in removing any of these soils.** There are 206 soil types representing a mix of colluvium, alluvium, loess and volcanic ash. The most prevalent soil type is a Toler Horseflat complex which is a loess mixed with volcanic ash over older loess and basalt.
- d. **Are there surface indications or history of unstable soils in the immediate vicinity? If so, describe.** No.

- e. **Describe the purpose, type, total area, and approximate quantities and total affected area of any filling, excavation, and grading proposed. Indicate source of fill. NA**
  
- f. **Could erosion occur because of clearing, construction, or use? If so, generally describe.**  
There is short term potential for erosion associated with burning operation, but erosion will be minimal. Low intensity burning operations will produce a habitat mosaic that will reduce or eliminate sediment transport because understory vegetation and structure heavily persists. Additionally, understory vegetation will recover rapidly post burn limiting long term impact.
  
- g. **About what percent of the site will be covered with impervious surfaces after project construction (for example, asphalt or buildings)? 0%**
  
- h. **Proposed measures to reduce or control erosion, or other impacts to the earth, if any.**  
We will perform mowing on snow covered or frozen ground to limit soil disturbance.

## 2. Air

- a. **What types of emissions to the air would result from the proposal during construction, operation, and maintenance when the project is completed?** If any, generally describe and give approximate quantities if known. Emissions include those from assorted vehicles used to transport equipment and people to site, and those from the executed 100-acre low intensity burn. Wood smoke will be produced and a smoke management approval process will be obtained via appropriate channels prior to burning. Burn will occur during spring of 2024 or fall of 2024 through spring of 2025.
  
- b. **Are there any off-site sources of emissions or odor that may affect your proposal? If so, generally describe.** No.
  
- c. **Proposed measures to reduce or control emissions or other impacts to air, if any:**  
Comply with burn permit and smoke management plan.

### 3. Water

#### a. Surface:

1. Is there any surface water body on or in the immediate vicinity of the site (including year-round and seasonal streams, saltwater, lakes, ponds, wetlands)? If yes, describe type and provide names. If appropriate, state what stream or river it flows into. No.
2. Will the project require any work over, in, or adjacent to (within 200 feet) the described waters? If yes, please describe and attach available plans. No.
3. Estimate the amount of fill and dredge material that would be placed in or removed from surface water or wetlands and indicate the area of the site that would be affected. Indicate the source of fill material. NA
4. Will the proposal require surface water withdrawals or diversions? Give a general description, purpose, and approximate quantities if known. No.
5. Does the proposal lie within a 100-year floodplain? If so, note location on the site plan. No.
6. Does the proposal involve any discharges of waste materials to surface waters? If so, describe the type of waste and anticipated volume of discharge. No.

#### b. Ground:

1. Will groundwater be withdrawn from a well for drinking water or other purposes? If so, give a general description of the well, proposed uses and approximate quantities withdrawn from the well. Will water be discharged to groundwater? Give a general description, purpose, and approximate quantities if known. No.
2. Describe waste material that will be discharged into the ground from septic tanks or other sources, if any (domestic sewage; industrial, containing the following chemicals...; agricultural; etc.). Describe the general size of the system, the number of such systems, the number of houses to be served (if applicable), or the number of animals or humans the system(s) are expected to serve. NA.

**c. Water Runoff (including stormwater):**

- 1. Describe the source of runoff (including storm water) and method of collection and disposal, if any (include quantities, if known). Where will this water flow? Will this water flow into other waters? If so, describe. NA.**
  
- 2. Could waste materials enter ground or surface waters? If so, generally describe. NA.**
  
- 3. Does the proposal alter or otherwise affect drainage patterns in the vicinity of the site? If so, describe. No.**

**d. Proposed measures to reduce or control surface, ground, and runoff water, and drainage pattern impacts, if any:**

## **4. Plants**

**a. Check the types of vegetation found on the site:**

- deciduous tree: alder, maple, aspen, other**
- evergreen tree: fir, cedar, pine, other**
- shrubs**
- grass**
- pasture**
- crop or grain**
- orchards, vineyards, or other permanent crops.**
- wet soil plants: cattail, buttercup, bullrush, skunk cabbage, other**
- water plants: water lily, eelgrass, milfoil, other**
- other types of vegetation**

**b. What kind and amount of vegetation will be removed or altered?** Using a mower or masticator along a meandering path, we will remove 50 acres of dense sagebrush wood and foliage that is above ground. Mowed material will primarily be moderately chopped up sagebrush that is deposited on the soil surface, reducing the overstory fuel load. A low intensity prescription burn will reduce the woody overstory and foliage of the sagebrush as well as the dried residual forb and grass cover for 100 acres.

- c. **List threatened and endangered species known to be on or near the site.**

Washington rare plant: puzzling rockcress (*Halimolobos perplexa* var. *perplexa*)

- d. **Proposed landscaping, use of native plants, or other measures to preserve or enhance vegetation on the site, if any.** Any disturbed areas will be monitored for cheatgrass invasion and treated with herbicide and planted with native bunchgrasses/forb mix if warranted.

- e. **List all noxious weeds and invasive species known to be on or near the site.**

Russian thistle, cheatgrass

## 5. Animals

- a. **List any birds and other animals that have been observed on or near the site or are known to be on or near the site.**

**Examples include:**

- **Birds:** hawks, songbirds and sagebrush obligate birds
- **Mammals:** deer, bear, coyote, various small mammals
- **Fish:** none

- b. **List any threatened and endangered species known to be on or near the site.**

Pygmy rabbit, Washington ground squirrel, Greater Sage-grouse. Pygmy rabbit occupied areas will be entirely avoided, which will be determined using winter occupancy surveys.

- c. **Is the site part of a migration route? If so, explain.** This area is within the Pacific Flyway for lesser sandhill cranes.

- d. **Proposed measures to preserve or enhance wildlife, if any.** The project will be beneficial to sagebrush obligate wildlife by proactively working to protect it. Mowing and controlled fire will help increase the heterogeneity of the existing even age sagebrush and help improve habitat resiliency should catastrophic fire occur.

- e. **List any invasive animal species known to be on or near the site.** None noted.



## 6. Energy and natural resources

- a. **What kinds of energy (electric, natural gas, oil, wood stove, solar) will be used to meet the completed project's energy needs? Describe whether it will be used for heating, manufacturing, etc.** NA.
- b. **Would your project affect the potential use of solar energy by adjacent properties? If so, generally describe.** NA.
- c. **What kinds of energy conservation features are included in the plans of this proposal? List other proposed measures to reduce or control energy impacts, if any.** NA.

## 7. Environmental health

- a. **Are there any environmental health hazards, including exposure to toxic chemicals, risk of fire and explosion, spill, or hazardous waste, that could occur because of this proposal? If so, describe.** There is a potential for a prescribed fire to become a wildfire. The burn plan inherently limits risk by controlling the conditions for burning and thereby minimizing risk. Additionally, the risk is extremely low because extensive firebreaks surrounding each Section within Sagebrush Flat unit.
  1. **Describe any known or possible contamination at the site from present or past uses.** None.
  2. **Describe existing hazardous chemicals/conditions that might affect project development and design. This includes underground hazardous liquid and gas transmission pipelines located within the project area and in the vicinity.** Transmission lines are on the southeast part of the unit in an area not identified for habitat enhancement.
  3. **Describe any toxic or hazardous chemicals that might be stored, used, or produced during the project's development or construction, or at any time during the operating life of the project.** Fueling areas are off site.
  4. **Describe special emergency services that might be required.** Human injuries would be dealt with by on-site staff. 911 would be called for any emergency situation, with the nearest hospital 15 miles from the project area. Staff will have cell phones, cell reception, and no one will work alone while burning.
  5. **Proposed measures to reduce or control environmental health hazards, if any.**

BMP will be applied to vehicles and powered equipment used for the project.

**b. Noise**

1. **What types of noise exist in the area which may affect your project (for example: traffic, equipment, operation, other)?** NA.
  
2. **What types and levels of noise would be created by or associated with the project on a short-term or a long-term basis (for example: traffic, construction, operation, other)? Indicate what hours noise would come from the site)?** The noise created by a mower/masticator will be similar to that of a large industrial size brush mower. Noise will occur persistently during daylight hours but only for a limited period of time when the ground is frozen.
  
3. **Proposed measures to reduce or control noise impacts, if any:** Staff will use appropriate PPE.

**8. Land and shoreline use**

- a. **What is the current use of the site and adjacent properties? Will the proposal affect current land uses on nearby or adjacent properties? If so, describe.** Current land use is a state wildlife area that provides critical habitat for listed species and public recreational opportunities such as hunting, wildlife watching, and hiking. The proposed project will enhance the resiliency of this habitat which is advantageous to the parties mentioned above and to the adjacent properties and landowners, WDNR and private landowners.
  
- b. **Has the project site been used as working farmlands or working forest lands? If so, describe. How much agricultural or forest land of long-term commercial significance will be converted to other uses because of the proposal, if any? If resource lands have not been designated, how many acres in farmland or forest land tax status will be converted to nonfarm or nonforest use?** Historically the land was grazed by cattle but grazing fell out of favor due to conflicts with funding goals.
  1. **Will the proposal affect or be affected by surrounding working farm or forest land normal business operations, such as oversize equipment access, the application of pesticides, tilling, and harvesting? If so, how?** No.
  
- c. **Describe any structures on the site.** No structures occur on site. Only evidence of historical occupation such as abandoned livestock troughs, wells, and debris scatter occur on the site.
  
- d. **Will any structures be demolished? If so, what?** No.

- e. **What is the current zoning classification of the site?** RR-20 Rural Resource District and Recreational
- f. **What is the current comprehensive plan designation of the site?** RR-20 Rural Resource District and Recreational
- g. **If applicable, what is the current shoreline master program designation of the site?**  
NA.
- h. **Has any part of the site been classified as a critical area by the city or county? If so, specify.**  
Shrubsteppe, Biodiversity Areas & Corridors
- i. **Approximately how many people would reside or work in the completed project?** 0
- j. **Approximately how many people would the completed project displace?** 0
- k. **Proposed measures to avoid or reduce displacement impacts, if any.** NA.
- l. **Proposed measures to ensure the proposal is compatible with existing and projected land uses and plans, if any.** NA.
- m. **Proposed measures to reduce or control impacts to agricultural and forest lands of long-term commercial significance, if any:** NA.

## 9. Housing

- a. **Approximately how many units would be provided, if any? Indicate whether high, middle, or low-income housing.** NA.
- b. **Approximately how many units, if any, would be eliminated? Indicate whether high, middle, or low-income housing.** NA.

- c. **Proposed measures to reduce or control housing impacts, if any:** NA.

## 10. Aesthetics

- a. **What is the tallest height of any proposed structure(s), not including antennas; what is the principal exterior building material(s) proposed?** NA.
- b. **What views in the immediate vicinity would be altered or obstructed?** NA.
- c. **Proposed measures to reduce or control aesthetic impacts, if any:** None.

## 11. Light and glare

- a. **What type of light or glare will the proposal produce? What time of day would it mainly occur?** NA.
- b. **Could light or glare from the finished project be a safety hazard or interfere with views?** NA.
- c. **What existing off-site sources of light or glare may affect your proposal?** NA.
- d. **Proposed measures to reduce or control light and glare impacts, if any:** None.

## 12. Recreation

- a. **What designated and informal recreational opportunities are in the immediate vicinity?** The project is located on a state wildlife area where hunting, wildlife viewing, horse-riding, and hiking can occur.
- b. **Would the proposed project displace any existing recreational uses? If so, describe.** The project would temporarily displace recreational users while the prescription burn was occurring.
- c. **Proposed measures to reduce or control impacts on recreation, including recreation opportunities to be provided by the project or applicant, if any:** None.

### 13. Historic and cultural preservation

- a. **Are there any buildings, structures, or sites, located on or near the site that are over 45 years old listed in or eligible for listing in national, state, or local preservation registers? If so, specifically describe.** No.
  
- b. **Are there any landmarks, features, or other evidence of Indian or historic use or occupation? This may include human burials or old cemeteries. Are there any material evidence, artifacts, or areas of cultural importance on or near the site? Please list any professional studies conducted at the site to identify such resources.** No.
  
- c. **Describe the methods used to assess the potential impacts to cultural and historic resources on or near the project site. Examples include consultation with tribes and the department of archeology and historic preservation, archaeological surveys, historic maps, GIS data, etc.** Consultation is completed prior to the start of the project.
  
- d. **Proposed measures to avoid, minimize, or compensate for loss, changes to, and disturbance to resources. Please include plans for the above and any permits that may be required.** Cultural Resources will be maintained and disturbances to these resources avoided. Inadvertent discovery Plan will be followed.

### 14. Transportation

- a. **Identify public streets and highways serving the site or affected geographic area and describe proposed access to the existing street system. Show on site plans, if any.**

The Sagebrush Flat Unit is located 15 miles north of Ephrata in Douglas County. The unit can be accessed from Douglas County Road 8 SE from Sagebrush Flat/Moses Coulee Road.

- b. **Is the site or affected geographic area currently served by public transit? If so, generally describe. If not, what is the approximate distance to the nearest transit stop?** No.
  
- c. **Will the proposal require any new or improvements to existing roads, streets, pedestrian, bicycle, or state transportation facilities, not including driveways? If so, generally describe (indicate whether public or private).** No. The existing public county roads and existing firebreaks will serve as internal nonpublic roads.

- d. Will the project or proposal use (or occur in the immediate vicinity of) water, rail, or air transportation? If so, generally describe. No.
- e. How many vehicular trips per day would be generated by the completed project or proposal? If known, indicate when peak volumes would occur and what percentage of the volume would be trucks (such as commercial and nonpassenger vehicles). What data or transportation models were used to make these estimates? The project would increase our vehicular trips by approximately 5 trucks for up to a months duration in winter. In Spring, it would peak at 25 trucks for a just a few days duration in spring.
- f. Will the proposal interfere with, affect, or be affected by the movement of agricultural and forest products on roads or streets in the area? If so, generally describe. No.
- g. Proposed measures to reduce or control transportation impacts, if any: None.

## 15. Public services

- a. Would the project result in an increased need for public services (for example: fire protection, police protection, public transit, health care, schools, other)? If so, generally describe. Increased fire protection may be required as a precaution during prescribed burning operations to prevent wildfire escapes ensuring the fire remains under control.
- b. Proposed measures to reduce or control direct impacts on public services, if any. None.

## 16. Utilities

- a. Circle utilities currently available at the site: electricity, natural gas, water, refuse service, telephone, sanitary sewer, septic system, other: None.
- b. Describe the utilities that are proposed for the project, the utility providing the service, and the general construction activities on the site or in the immediate vicinity which might be needed. None.

## C. Signature

The above answers are true and complete to the best of my knowledge. I understand that the lead agency is relying on them to make its decision.

### **C. Signature**

The above answers are true and complete to the best of my knowledge. I understand that the lead agency is relying on them to make its decision.

**X**   

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**Type name of signee:** Sidra Blake

**Position and agency/organization:** Assistant Wildlife Manager, Douglas County Wildlife Area Complex, WDFW

**Date submitted:** 12/5/2023

**Attachments:** Vicinity and Site Maps