



January 6, 2017

Interested Party List

RE: Draft EA for Venture Stone LLC, for an Application for an Operating Permit

Dear Reader:

Enclosed for your review and comment is a Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) for an Operating Permit requested by Venture Stone LLC, (Venture Stone) located at 3953 Parkwood Dr., Billings, MT 59106. Venture Stone filed an application for a multiple quarry Operating Permit under Section 82-4-353(1), MCA, of the Metal Mine Reclamation Act, on July 25, 2016 from the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), Hard Rock Mining Bureau located in Helena.

The Operating Permit would authorize the quarrying of rock at the following five sites:

1. Portions of Sections 20, 21, 28, and 29, Township 18 North, Range 4 East
2. Portions of Sections 13, 14, 15, 17, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, and 29, Township 18 North, Range 3 East
3. Portions of Sections 20, 28, 29, 30 and 32, Township 18 North, Range 4 East
4. Portions of Sections 33 and 34, Township 18 North, Range 4 East, and Sections 3 and 4, Township 17 North, Range 4 East.
5. Portions of Section 32, Township 18 North, Range 6 East, and Sections 5, 6, 7, 8, 17, 18 and 19, Township 17 North, Range 6 East.

Sites 1 through 4 are about 13 miles south of Great Falls and about 40 miles east of Cascade. Site 5 is about ten miles south of Belt. Additionally, the Operating Permit would authorize stone processing at an existing building at 795 Ulm Vaughn Road about four miles southeast of Vaughn. All sites are on private property in Cascade County.

The Operating Permit would cover a total of 10,012 acres, of which approximately 9,550 acres would be disturbed over the next ten years. Sandstone rocks laying on the surface would be removed with hand tools or with an excavator or backhoe. Depressions up to a foot in depth would be left. The rock would be transported to a palleting/staging area with a skid-steer loader. The rock would be used for various masonry purposes.

This Draft EA evaluates the potential impacts from this proposed permit application. The DEQ must decide whether to approve the permit as proposed, deny the request for an Operating Permit, or approve the Operating Permit with modifications.

The Draft EA addresses issues and concerns raised during public involvement and from agency scoping. The agency has decided to approve the permit application with no agency modifications. This is not a final decision. This conclusion may change based on comments received from the public on this Draft EA, new information, or new analysis that may be needed in preparing the Final EA.

Copies of the Draft EA can be obtained by writing DEQ, Hard Rock Mining Bureau, PO Box 200901, Helena, MT 59620, c/o Herb Rolfes, or calling (406) 444-3841; or sending email addressed to hrolfes@mt.gov. The Draft EA will also be posted on the DEQ web page: www.deq.mt.gov. Public comments concerning the adequacy and accuracy of the Draft EA will be accepted until February 10, 2017.

Since the Final EA may only contain public comments and responses, and a list of changes to the Draft EA, please keep this Draft EA for future reference.

Warren D. McCullough
Warren D. McCullough, Chief
Hard Rock Mining Bureau

1/6/17
Date

EXPANDED CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

COMPANY NAME: Venture Stone, LLC, 3953 Parkwood Dr., Billings, MT 59106.

PROJECT: Building stone quarry and rock collecting sites.

PERMIT OR LICENSE: Pending operating Permit 00189

LOCATION:

Site 1: Township 18 North, Range 4 East, part of Sections 20, 21, 28, 29. Total area to be permitted in Site 1 would be 955.55 acres in Cascade County about 17 miles south of Great Falls, MT; and

Site 2: Township 18 North, Range 3 East, part of Sections 13, 14, 15, 17, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 26, 27, 28, and 29. Total area to be permitted in Site 2 (Smith River Quarry) is 5114.78 acres in Cascade County about 20 miles south of Great Falls, MT.

Site 3: Township 18 North, Range 4 East, part of Sections 20, 28, 29, 30, and 32. Total area to be permitted in Site 3 is 962.56 acres in Cascade County about 18 miles south of Great Falls, MT

Site 4: Township 18 North, Range 4 East, part of Sections 33 and 34, and Township 17 North Range 4 East Sections 3 and 4. Total area to be permitted in Site 3 is 755.82 acres in Cascade County about 20 miles southeast of Great Falls, MT.

Site 5: Township 18 North, Range 6 East, part of Section 32, and Township 17 North, Range 6 East, all or part of Section 5, 6, 7, 8, 17, 18, and 19. Total area to be permitted in Site 5 is 2185.09 in Cascade County about 9 miles south of Belt, MT.

Site 6: Lots 1 and 2 of the Phillips Subdivision located at 795 Ulm Vaughn Road, Great Falls. The total area to be permitted in Site 6 is 38.96 acres in Cascade County about 2 miles south of Vaughn, MT.

(See Figure 1 for site locations)

PROPERTY OWNERSHIP: ☐ Federal ☐ State ☒ Private

TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION: Venture Stone, LLC has applied for an operating permit under the Metal Mine Reclamation Act to quarry and collect building stone on 5 sites and process stone at an additional site (Site 6) in Cascade County.

Operating Plan: Venture Stone, LLC filed an operating permit application on July 25, 2016 from the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), Hard Rock Mining Bureau in Helena, MT. Venture Stone, LLC has lease agreements with the landowners. Rock would be removed for the purpose of landscaping and masonry. The permit area would consist of a total of about 10,012 acres on private land. Venture Stone, LLC has already disturbed 58 acres and will disturb a maximum of 128 acres in the next five years.

Operating Permit 000189	Proposed Permit Area
Permit Area	10,012 acres
Permitted Disturbance	9,550 acres

Venture Stone, LLC would quarry landscaping and masonry rock found along outcrops, hilltops, and other

areas. Rock in Sites 1 through 5 is proposed for surface picking where rock exposed on the surface is pried up, either by hand, or with the aid of a skid steer loader or excavator. The excavated stone would be transported to a palleting/staging area (Site 6) for each site using a skid-steer loader. Palletted rock would be loaded onto trucks for shipping off site.

Reclamation Plan: Surface removal of rock only is proposed. The land would be returned to approximate original topography. All equipment and any temporary structures would be removed. Land would be reclaimed as pasture. Rock removal sites would be scarified as needed before replanting.

Sites 1 through 5 would have no significant soil disturbance and would not need soil stockpiles as rock would be removed from the surface without subsurface excavation. Site 6 is to remain an industrial site.

The proposed application has been reviewed for compliance under a Supplemental Programmatic Environmental Assessment (SPEA) for a General Quarry Operating Permit published by the DEQ in February 2004. The site meets all the requirements under the SPEA except that the disturbance cannot be kept below five acres disturbed and unreclaimed at any one time.

IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT	
RESOURCE	[Y/N] POTENTIAL IMPACT AND MITIGATION MEASURES
1. GEOLOGY AND SOIL QUALITY, STABILITY AND MOISTURE: Are soils present which are fragile, erosive, susceptible to compaction, or unstable? Are there unusual or unstable geologic features? Are there special reclamation considerations?	<p>[Y] <u>Soils</u></p> <p>Proposed sites 1, 3 and 4 are varied in soil type covered with predominantly silty clay loam soils. Surface removal of rock would occur on or near ridgelines that have a thin soil cover. Venture Stone, LLC would be focusing activities in areas where multiple rocks are lying on the surface of the ground or outcropping in rocky ridges.</p> <p>The most common soils are the Absarokee Clay Loam (clay loams comprising 29.3% of the area), the Darrett-Castner Complex (silty clays and silty clay loams comprising 19% of the area), Bitton and Roy soils (stony loams comprising 18.5% of the area) and the Timberg-Big Timber Complex (silty clays comprising 11.7% of the area).</p> <p>Site 2 is similar to sites 1, 3 and 4 however; this mapped area has 35.9 percent of its surface area covered by Bitton and Roy soils.</p> <p>The most common soil types at Site 5 are the Loggert Extremely Stony Loam (26.3% of the area), the Work Clay Loam (15.9% of the area) and the Monad Loam (10.9% of the area).</p> <p>Soil impacts would be insignificant because the proposed rock collection process is minimally invasive. Also, concurrent reclamation would limit the amount of soil susceptible to erosion from wind and water. Failed cover plants would be reseeded until vegetation is successfully established. No permanent roads would be constructed. Traffic volume would not increase as a result of approval of the amendment.</p>

IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT	
	<p>Soil maps prepared by the Natural Resources Conservation Service are provided in Appendix E of the application.</p> <p>Site 6 is a former industrial site and would be used for rock processing.</p> <p><u>Geology</u></p> <p>Removal of Cretaceous Kootenai Formation rocks from the surface and shallow pits is an unavoidable impact of rock product operations.</p>
<p>2. WATER QUALITY, QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION: Are important surface or groundwater resources present? Is there potential for violation of ambient water quality standards, drinking water maximum contaminant levels, or degradation of water quality?</p>	<p>[N] Site 1: There are only ephemeral drainages on this site. Depth to water based on well logs is about 630 feet below ground surface.</p> <p>Site 2: Ming Coulee, a perennial stream, flows through Sections 27 and 28 in Site 2. The Smith River is slightly more than two miles west of the western boundary of Site 2. There are 4 developed springs within the boundary of Site 2. No mining would be performed within 100 feet of any spring or the typical seasonal high-water mark of any perennial stream. Depth to water based on well logs is about 42 feet below ground surface.</p> <p>Site 3: Site 3 contains only ephemeral drainages. Ming Coulee is ¼ mile south of the southern boundary of Site 3. Depth to water based on well logs is about 60 feet below ground surface.</p> <p>Site 4: Site 4 contains two unnamed ephemeral drainages. Ming Coulee is 1/8 mile from the southernmost boundary of Site 4. Depth to water based on well logs is about 87 feet below ground surface.</p> <p>Site 5: Box Elder Creek and the Eastern Fork of Sand Coulee Creek flow through this site. Neil Creek approaches within ¼ mile of the eastern boundary of Site 5. No mining would be performed within 100 feet of Box Elder Creek or the East Fork of Sand Coulee Creek's typical seasonal high-water mark or any perennial stream. Depth to water based on well logs is about 207 feet below ground surface.</p> <p>Site 6: The northeast corner of Site 6 is about 800 feet from the Sun River. An ephemeral drainage crosses the northwest corner of the site. Depth to water based on well logs is about 18 feet below ground surface. This site would be used for processing rock collected from Sites 1 through 5. No mining will occur on this site.</p> <p>Surface rock removal would not impact nearby domestic wells.</p>
<p>3. AIR QUALITY: Will pollutants or particulate be produced? Is the project influenced by air quality regulations or zones (Class I airshed)?</p>	<p>[Y] There would be dust produced by the operation due to travel on gravel roads commonly found in the area. Landowners can require dust control as needed on their leases to the company. Concurrent reclamation would limit the potential for blowing dust from the operating area. Rock fragments left in the replaced soil would limit</p>

IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT	
	blowing dust.
<p>4. VEGETATION COVER, QUANTITY AND QUALITY: Will vegetation communities be significantly impacted? Are any rare plants or cover types present?</p>	<p>[Y] Quarrying would occur on landscapes that have a thin soil cover. The sites are dominated by native grasses, providing approximately 50 percent ground cover. Species composition varies over the proposed permit area. However, a generalized species composition table for the sites would be:</p> <p>Bluebunch wheatgrass 30 to 50% Idaho fescue 20 to 30% Needle and thread 20 to 30% Western and thickspike wheatgrass 10 to 20% Prairie Junegrass, blue grama, threadleaf sedge 10 to 20% Forbs 10 to 20%</p> <p>The disturbed sites would be broadcast seeded with:</p> <p>40% Critana thickspike wheatgrass at 11 lbs./acre 20% Secar bluebunch wheatgrass at 6 lbs./acre 20% Lodorn green needlegrass at 5 lbs./acre 10% Sandberg bluegrass at 0.5 lbs./acre 10% Annual ryegrass at 2 lbs./acre for a total of 24.5 lbs./acre.</p> <p>Whitetop and leafy spurge are present in the proposed permit area sites 1, 2, 3, and 4. The operator would use weed free seed and control noxious weeds per the Cascade County Weed Management Plan.</p> <p>The plant communities on these shallow to very shallow range sites are dominated by native grasses. The plant communities that would be impacted are common in the sedimentary plains of Montana. The site is on native range used for grazing and crops.</p> <p>A search of the Montana Natural Heritage Program (MNHP) database did not identify any rare plants or plant species of concern.</p> <p>Disturbance on the sites would lead to more noxious weed invasion in the areas, especially from the existing populations of leafy spurge. Weed control efforts would limit these impacts. The disturbed land would be reclaimed to livestock grazing and dryland farming. Loss of native species on disturbed rangeland would be an unavoidable impact of disturbance.</p>
<p>5. TERRESTRIAL, AVIAN AND AQUATIC LIFE AND HABITATS: Is there substantial use of the area by important wildlife, birds or fish?</p>	<p>[Y] The proposed permit area is commonly used by mule deer and antelope. They would be displaced around the human activity until reclamation is completed. There is no winter range for ungulate species or aquatic habitat in the proposed permit area.</p>
<p>6. UNIQUE, ENDANGERED, FRAGILE OR LIMITED</p>	<p>[Y] A search of the Montana Natural Heritage Program (MNHP)</p>

IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT	
ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES: Are any federally listed threatened or endangered species or identified habitat present? Any wetlands? Species of special concern?	database at the Montana State Library in Helena, MT found no known threatened and endangered (T&E) animal species, or animal species of concern at any of the proposed sites.
7. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES: Are any historical, archaeological or paleontological resources present?	<p>[Y] A records search by the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) noted a number of historic roads that are still in use.</p> <p>Venture Stone has committed to: Provide appropriate protection for archeological and historic values found in the permit area, and, route operations around a site of discovery, promptly notify SHPO, and leave the site undisturbed until proper evaluation is made.</p>
8. AESTHETICS: Is the project on a prominent topographic feature? Will it be visible from populated or scenic areas? Will there be excessive noise or light?	<p>[Y] The proposed rock collecting sites are in a rural area. Activity would be visible from nearby county roads during operations, but the disturbance created would not be readily apparent in the absence of construction equipment. The reclaimed rock collecting sites would appear similar to the original rangeland in the area.</p> <p>No new roads would be constructed.</p> <p>The hours of operation would be four days per week, 10 hours per day, all year long.</p>
9. DEMANDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES OF LAND, WATER, AIR OR ENERGY: Will the project use resources that are limited in the area? Are there other activities nearby that will affect the project?	[N] The project sites are isolated, and would require a minimum of energy resources.
10. IMPACTS ON OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES: Are there other activities nearby that will affect the project?	[N] The surrounding land uses are livestock grazing and dryland farming.

IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION	
11. HUMAN HEALTH AND SAFETY: Will this project add to health and safety risks in the area?	[N]
12. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION: Will the	[N] These operations are a source of income for area ranchers.

IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION	
project add to or alter these activities?	
13. QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYMENT: Will the project create, move or eliminate jobs? If so, estimated number.	[N] Currently, Venture Stone is a minor employer in Cascade County, providing work for a segment of the population that is otherwise unemployed, or underemployed. No additional employees would be necessary.
14. LOCAL AND STATE TAX BASE AND TAX REVENUES: Will the project create or eliminate tax revenue?	[N] This project would create tax revenue.
15. DEMAND FOR GOVERNMENT SERVICES: Will substantial traffic be added to existing roads? Will other services (fire protection, police, schools, etc.) be needed?	[N] There is no anticipated need for increased government services as a result of this project.
16. LOCALLY ADOPTED ENVIRONMENTAL PLANS AND GOALS: Are there State, County, City, USFS, BLM, Tribal, etc. zoning or management plans in effect?	[N]
17. ACCESS TO AND QUALITY OF RECREATIONAL AND WILDERNESS ACTIVITIES: Are wilderness or recreational areas nearby or accessed through this tract? Is there recreational potential within the tract?	[N]
18. DENSITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION AND HOUSING: Will the project add to the population and require additional housing?	[N]
19. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES: Is some disruption of native or traditional lifestyles or communities possible?	[N] The work force would be local or drawn from neighboring counties. Royalty payments made to landowners of rock removal sites help maintain the sometimes tenuous existence of family owned farms and ranches.
20. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY: Will the action	[N]

IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION	
cause a shift in some unique quality of the area?	
21. PRIVATE PROPERTY IMPACTS: Are we regulating the use of private property under a regulatory statute adopted pursuant to the police power of the state? (Property management, grants of financial assistance, and the exercise of the power of eminent domain are not within this category.) If not, no further analysis is required.	[Y]
22. PRIVATE PROPERTY IMPACTS: Does the proposed regulatory action restrict the use of the regulated person's private property? If not, no further analysis is required.	[N] In 1995, the Montana Legislature amended the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to require state agencies to evaluate in their environmental documents any regulatory restrictions proposed to be imposed on the use of private property. Section 75-1-201(1)(b)(iv)(D), MCA. Alternatives and mitigation measures designed to make the project meet minimum environmental standards with implementation methods specifically required by federal or state laws and regulations are excluded from evaluation under the implementing guidelines for Section 75-1-201(1)(b)(iv)(D), MCA.
23. PRIVATE PROPERTY IMPACTS: Does the agency have legal discretion to impose or not impose the proposed restriction or discretion as to how the restriction will be imposed? If not, no further analysis is required. If so, the agency must determine if there are alternatives that would reduce, minimize or eliminate the restriction on the use of private property, and analyze such alternatives.	[Y] The Proposed Action and Type and Purpose sections above identify the objectives of this environmental assessment. See item 22 above.
24. OTHER APPROPRIATE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES:	[N]
25. SAGE GROUSE EXECUTIVE ORDER: Is the project proposed in core, general or connectivity sage grouse habitat, as designated by the Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation	[N]

IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION

Program (Program) at: <https://sagegrouse.mt.gov> If yes, did the applicant attach documentation from the Program showing compliance with Executive Order 12-2015 and the Program's recommendations? If so, attach the documentation to the EA and address the Program's recommendations in the permit. If project is in core, general or connectivity habitat and the applicant did not document consultation with the Program, refer the applicant to the Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program.

25. Alternatives Considered:
No Action: Deny the request for an operating permit. No issues were identified which would require denying the permit.
Approval: Approve the operating permit as proposed.
Approval with Modification: None.
26. Public Involvement: A legal notice was published in the Great Falls Tribune and Lewistown News-Argus. A press release was issued on receipt of the application for an operating permit. A legal notice and press release will be published with release of the Draft EA.
27. Other Governmental Agencies with Jurisdiction: None
28. Magnitude and Significance of Potential Impacts: There would be no significant impacts associated with this proposal.
29. Building stone quarries and rock collecting sites are increasing throughout Montana. DEQ has prepared a SPEA on these operations. The operations that qualify must meet the following provisions: Any individual small quarry may maintain a working disturbance of up to five acres. Total disturbance during the life of an individual operation could exceed five acres, but concurrent reclamation would be required to keep the disturbance at any one time to five acres or less. Access roads would not be included in the disturbed total, but the operator would submit a reclamation bond for roads that do not have an approved use after quarrying. Roads approved for the land use after quarrying and access or haulage roads which are required by a local, state, or federal agency having jurisdiction over that road would not have to be bonded;
 - There would be no impact to any wetland, surface or ground water;
 - There would be no constructed impoundments or reservoirs used in the operation;
 - There would be no potential to produce any acid or other pollutive drainage from the quarry;
 - There would be no impact to threatened and endangered species; and
 - There would be no impact to significant historic or archaeological features.

The site proposed by Venture Stone, LLC meets all of these requirements except the operator cannot keep the disturbance to less than five acres disturbed and unreclaimed at any one time. Even though the site may exceed five acres disturbed and unreclaimed at any one time, there would be no other impacts other than the size of the disturbance area over those analyzed in the SPEA. This Checklist EA tiers to

the 2004 SPEA. Reclamation would limit impacts. DEQ would bond Venture Stone, LLC to reclaim the acres disturbed by quarrying.

Many acres could be potentially disturbed by quarry operations throughout Montana as a result of the demand for building stone. The cumulative impacts from these operations can lead to more soil disturbance requiring reclamation, more impacts to native plant communities, and increased potential for noxious weed invasion and spread, as well as economic benefits to the local economies from quarry operations.

30. Recommendation for Further Environmental Analysis:

☐ EIS ☐ More Detailed EA ☒ No Further Analysis

The DEQ has selected Approval as the preferred alternative.

DEQ has considered the criteria set forth in ARM 17.4.608 and has determined that an EA is an appropriate level of analysis. As reflected in this Expanded Checklist EA, none of the adverse effects of the impacts resulting from the proposed action are significant. Impacts that would occur from the proposed action of removing rock from the surface and near surface are discussed above. Other than the temporary disturbance of soil and vegetation there would be no impacts. The minor ground disturbances resulting from the removal of decorative and masonry rock would be recontoured and revegetated.

31. References:

GWIC, <http://mbmggwic.mtech.edu/>,
NRCS, <http://websoilsurvey.sc.egov.usda.gov/App/WebSoilSurvey.aspx>,
NRIS and MNHP, <http://nrismt.gov/reqapp/userMain.asp>.

32. EA Checklist Prepared By:

Betsy Hovda, DEQ Environmental Science Specialist
Herb Rolfes, DEQ Operating Permits Section Supervisor

33. This EA was reviewed by:

Warren McCullough, DEQ, Hard Rock Mining Bureau, Chief

Approved By:

Warren D. McCullough

1/5/17

Signature

Date

Warren D. McCullough, Chief
Hard Rock Mining Bureau, DEQ

File: 00163.70

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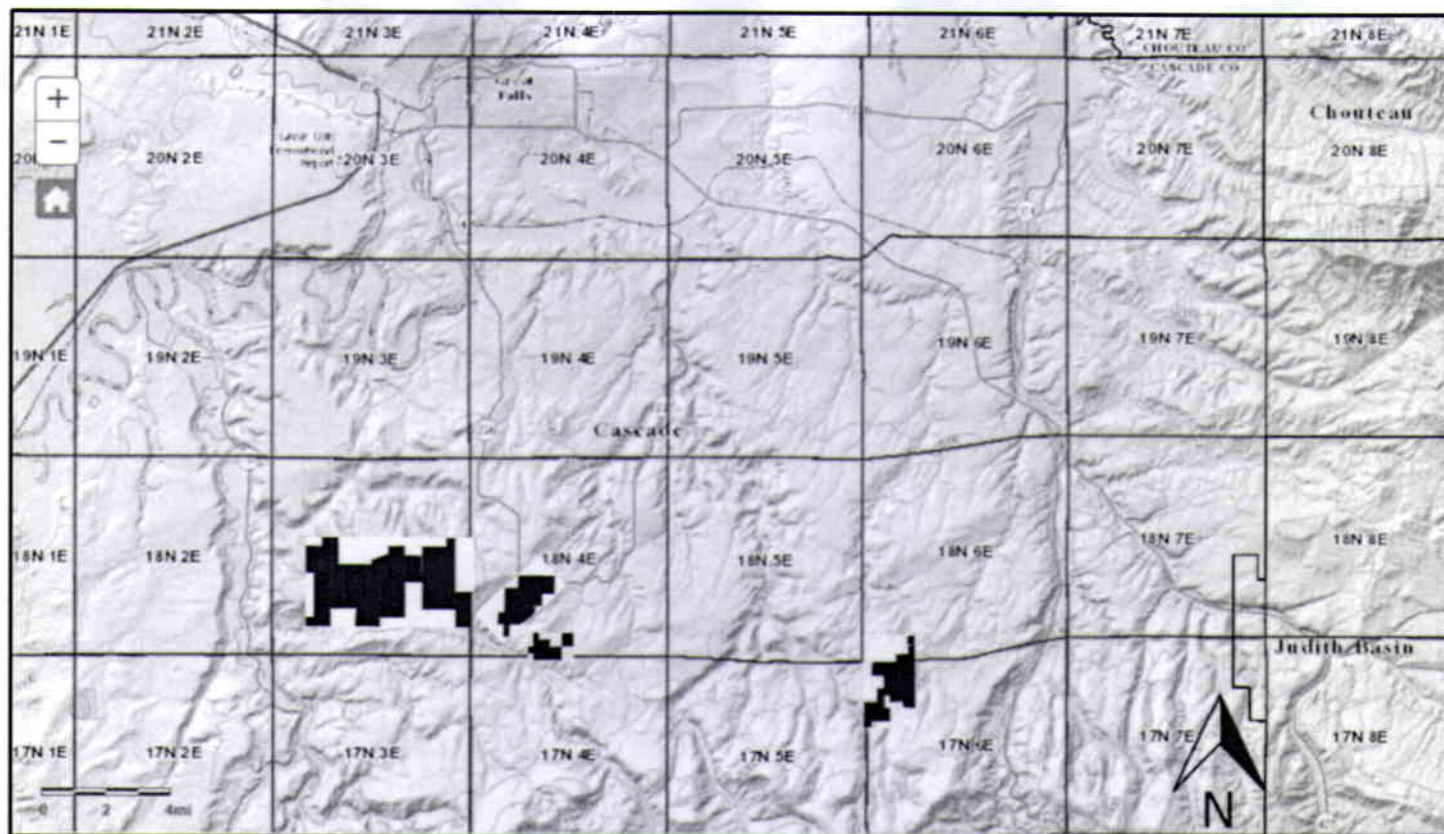


Figure 1. Locations of Sites 1-5.