

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy



Proposed Action: Walla Walla Basin Vegetation Maintenance and Watershed Surveillance

Project No.: 2008-2003-00

Project Manager: Corrie Veenstra

Location: Umatilla County, Oregon

Categorical Exclusion Applied (from Subpart D, 10 C.F.R. Part 1021): B1.20 Protection of cultural resources, fish and wildlife habitat; B3.3 Research related to conservation of fish and wildlife

Description of the Proposed Action: Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) proposes to fund the Walla Walla Basin Watershed Council (WWBWC) to maintain vegetation planted in previous project areas and conduct on-going watershed surveillance activities. Maintaining healthy riparian vegetation is essential to protect the initial project investments and enhance stream restoration. Water surveillance would provide information to evaluate and assess water conditions and guide adaptive management decisions made by local stakeholders. These activities would contribute to Chinook, steelhead, and bull trout restoration efforts. These actions would support conservation of Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed species considered in the 2020 ESA consultations with both the National Marine Fisheries Service and the US Fish and Wildlife Service on the operations and maintenance of the Columbia River System, while also supporting ongoing efforts to mitigate for effects of the Federal Columbia River Power System (FCRPS) on fish and wildlife in the mainstem Columbia River and its tributaries pursuant to the Pacific Northwest Electric Power Planning and Conservation Act of 1980 (Northwest Power Act) (16 U.S.C. (USC) 839 et seq.)."

Vegetation Maintenance: To optimize habitat complexity, the WWBWC would monitor previous project sites, the Couse Creek Passage and Lampson Side channel, and perform landscaping duties such as weeding and supplemental planting when necessary. All planting and maintenance would be performed by hand or with hand tools. These activities would only require shallow digging and would not disrupt surrounding vegetation. No herbicides would be used and no in-water work would be involved. Work would only occur in areas previously planted. Work would occur as needed in spring or fall.

Water Surveillance: The WWBWC would conduct water surveillance at established locations along the Walla Walla River and Little Walla Walla River three to five times per year. Water surveillance would include: measuring stream flow, turbidity, and temperature using handheld devices; accessing pre-existing stream gauges to download data; deploying non-intrusive submersible data loggers; and documentation of habitat conditions such as flood damage and riparian growth. Sites would be accessed by vehicle and by foot on existing roads and trails. Survey sites are several miles downstream from observed steelhead and bull trout spawning areas and in-channel measurements would occur in late May or early June; well outside the typical spawning window.

Findings: In accordance with Section 1021.410(b) of the Department of Energy's (DOE) National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Regulations (57 FR 15144, Apr. 24, 1992, as amended at 61 FR 36221-36243, Jul. 9, 1996; 61 FR 64608, Dec. 6, 1996, 76 FR 63764, Nov. 14, 2011), BPA has determined that the proposed action:

- 1) fits within a class of actions listed in Appendix B of 10 CFR 1021, Subpart D (see attached Environmental Checklist);
- 2) does not present any extraordinary circumstances that may affect the significance of the environmental effects of the proposal; and
- 3) has not been segmented to meet the definition of a categorical exclusion.

Based on these determinations, BPA finds that the proposed action is categorically excluded from further NEPA review.

/s/ Lindsey Arotin

Lindsey Arotin
Environmental Protection Specialist

Concur:

/s/ Sarah T. Biegel

Sarah T. Biegel
NEPA Compliance Officer

August 3, 2021

Date

Attachment(s): Environmental Checklist

Categorical Exclusion Environmental Checklist

This checklist documents environmental considerations for the proposed project and explains why the project would not have the potential to cause significant impacts on environmentally sensitive resources and would meet other integral elements of the applied categorical exclusion.

Proposed Action: Walla Walla Basin Vegetation Maintenance and Watershed Surveillance

Project Site Description

Water surveillance would occur at several locations along the Walla Walla River and the Little Walla Walla River in the Milton-Freewater Valley in Umatilla County, OR. Stream gauges and monitoring locations are primarily in rural and agricultural areas located on both state and private land; all sites are pre-existing with established landowner agreements. Vegetation maintenance would occur approximately 2.5 miles southeast of Milton-Freewater, OR. The Lampson site is along the Walla Walla River; the Couse Creek site is along Couse Creek; both sites are on private property and are approximately 0.75 miles upstream from the Couse Creek confluence.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation:

Vegetation Maintenance: BPA made a determination of no historic properties affected on September 16, 2019. Oregon State Historic Preservation Office concurred on October 21, 2019. The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Reservation (CTUIR) concurred on September 23, 2019, and the Nez Perce Tribe deferred to CTUIR for consultation.

Water Surveillance: BPA made a determination that these actions have no potential to cause effects on historic properties on July 28, 2021.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Vegetation management would disturb the soil at the project site. Ground disturbance would be minimal and limited to hand planting and some use of small hand tools. All areas where planting would occur have been previously disturbed by construction and planting activities. Replanting and maintaining vegetation would be intended to improve habitat conditions. Water data collection would have no anticipated impact.

3. Plants (including Federal/state special-status species and habitats)

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Minor and temporary ground and vegetation disturbances would occur as part of the vegetation maintenance. These activities would contribute to riparian restoration and would ultimately benefit surrounding vegetation. No ESA-listed, state-listed, or sensitive plant species are known to exist on the site. No designated critical habitat is present. Minor

and temporary disturbances may occur during water data collection; lasting impact would not be anticipated.

4. Wildlife (including Federal/state special-status species and habitats)

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No ESA-listed, state-listed, or sensitive wildlife species were documented in, or adjacent to, the project areas and no designated critical habitat is present. Wildlife present on the site during vegetation maintenance and water data collection activities may be temporarily disturbed by human presence and noise. The proposed actions would restore riparian vegetation and stream processes, which would likely improve conditions for surrounding wildlife.

5. Water Bodies, Floodplains, and Fish (including Federal/state special-status species, ESUs, and habitats)

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: None of the proposed activities would occur in Federal/state special-status species' habitats. Vegetation maintenance and water data collection would both occur stream adjacent, but activities would not involve any handling of fish or in-water disturbances aside from handling the data loggers.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No wetlands are present in the project area and no wetlands would be disturbed during vegetation maintenance or water data collection.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No actions during vegetation maintenance or water data collection would have potential to impact groundwater or aquifers.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No change in land use would occur as a result of vegetation maintenance or water data collection.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed work would have little to no effect on visual quality. Vegetation maintenance would restore vegetation and water data collection would have no anticipated impact.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Air quality is not likely to be impacted during vegetation maintenance or water data collection. A temporary disturbance may occur from increase vehicles in the areas.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The vegetation maintenance and water data collection would result in a temporary increase in ambient noise due to human presence.

12. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: All applicable safety regulations would be followed during work activities.

Evaluation of Other Integral Elements

The proposed project would also meet conditions that are integral elements of the categorical exclusion. The project would not:

Threaten a violation of applicable statutory, regulatory, or permit requirements for environment, safety, and health, or similar requirements of DOE or Executive Orders.

Explanation: N/A

Require siting and construction or major expansion of waste storage, disposal, recovery, or treatment facilities (including incinerators) that are not otherwise categorically excluded.

Explanation: N/A

Disturb hazardous substances, pollutants, contaminants, or CERCLA excluded petroleum and natural gas products that preexist in the environment such that there would be uncontrolled or unpermitted releases.

Explanation: N/A

Involve genetically engineered organisms, synthetic biology, governmentally designated noxious weeds, or invasive species, unless the proposed activity would be contained or confined in a manner designed and operated to prevent unauthorized release into the environment and conducted in accordance with applicable requirements, such as those of the Department of Agriculture, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the National Institutes of Health.

Explanation: N/A

Landowner Notification, Involvement, or Coordination

Description: The Walla Walla Basin Watershed Council developed and agreed upon the proposed vegetation maintenance with the landowners. The water data collection sites are accessible via public trails and roads, and when water data collection takes place on private property, WWBWC would coordinate with the private landowner as needed for site access.

Based on the foregoing, this proposed project does not have the potential to cause significant impacts to any environmentally sensitive resource.

Signed: /s/ Lindsey Arotin August 3, 2021
Lindsey Arotin, ECF – 4 Date
Environmental Protection Specialist