Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy

Proposed Action: Red River and Newsome Creek Watershed Projects

Project No.: 2002-072-00

Project Manager: Jennifer Lord, EWM - 4

Location: Idaho County, Idaho

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

Description of the Proposed Action: The Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) proposes to fund the Nez Perce Tribe (the Tribe) to conduct fish and wildlife habitat improvement actions in the watersheds of Red River and Newsome Creek in west-central Idaho. These actions would support the conservation of Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed species considered in the 2020 ESA consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) on the operations and maintenance of the Columbia River System while also supporting ongoing efforts to mitigate for the effects of the Federal Columbia River Power System 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.).

Project actions would include the following:

Vegetation Maintenance

The Tribe would maintain vegetation across roughly 26 acres of prior project sites along Red River and Newsome Creek. Areas that would be maintained are mainly riparian areas that were re-planted after habitat restoration activities implemented in prior years. Particular focus would be given to clearing encroaching grass and vegetation that is crowding out desirable species, such as willow (*Salix exigua*) and thinleaf alder (*Alnus incana*). In open areas, grass would also be mowed and vegetation trimmed with hand tools as appropriate. Debris from high-water events and trash left from people would be cleared and disposed. No chemical herbicides would be used. The Tribe would also continue to test the use of browse deterrents (such as applying topical scent repellant spray and installing chicken wire fencing around newly planted trees) to attempt to dissuade large game from eating young forbs and tree plantings.

Vegetation Planting

The Tribe would re-plant a section of the Red River Meadows management area which has not grown as expected. The roughly 3-acre area sits on a portion of the bank of the Red River that was re-channelized in the mid-1990s. The natural re-vegetation of the area following that work

has not been sufficient to meet the desired conditions of the area. The Tribe would plant nursey-grown trees and woody vegetation along the bank of the river to supplement the natural growth. Species planted would include willow, thinleaf alder, lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta*), blue elderberry (*Sambucus nigra ssp. cerulea*), and quaking aspen (*Populus treemuloides*). Based on past planting successes in other areas of the Red River Meadows area, the Tribe would use larger plant sizes, up to eight gallons. Use of larger plants instead of seed or smaller plants has led to best survival rates at planting sites in the northern end of the management area. Plants would be planted using hand tools or small machinery such as skid steers and mini-excavators as appropriate. No work would occur in-water. Plants would be monitored for at least the next five years and re-planted as appropriate to ensure the establishment of a self-sustaining riparian corridor.

Fence Maintenance

The Tribe would maintain roughly two miles of existing exclusion fencing along the border of the Red River Meadows management area. The fencing was constructed between 2007 and 2009 and requires routine maintenance to ensure that it is deterring trespass by people and cattle into the management area. The fencing is largely composed of wooden post and rail, with some segments of four-strand barbed wire. The Tribe would repair any damage caused to the fence from the elements or vandalism. Work would include replacing any segments that have broken, re-stringing wire, nailing boards that have become loose, and any other necessary work to ensure the continued structural viability of the fence. No new fencing would be constructed and all replacements would be like-for-like.

Trapper Creek Culvert Replacements

The Tribe, in coordination with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), would replace two undersized corrugated metal culverts along Trapper Creek. The culverts run under Forest Service Road #9560 and are located on land in the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest. One culvert is 36 inches in diameter and the other is 48 inches, too small for the high flow events of the stream during late spring thaws. Additionally, both culverts are highly perched at their outlets, preventing both resident and anadromous fish from accessing the roughly two stream miles of potential spawning and rearing habitat above the culverts. Both culverts would be replaced with new open arch steel culverts. The new culverts would be large enough to meet both fish passage criteria and handle flow exceedances up to a 100-year flood. The new culverts would also have open bottoms with natural streambeds to improve fish passage.

The Tribe and USFS would replace the culverts by first diverting the stream above the project site and dewatering the channel surrounding the culverts. Once dry, the Tribe and USFS would remove the road prism above the culverts, excavate the culverts, install pre-cast concrete footers in place, and attach the new culvert arches to the footers. Streambed material would be placed underneath the new culvert. Once installed, the Tribe and USFS would rebuild the road prism above the culverts to match the current conditions. All disturbed areas outside of the road prism would be re-seeded with native grass and forb seed following construction.

Staging for materials and equipment used for the project would be in adjacent grass fields. All work would be conducted during the low flow of the stream in the summer of 2023 and would be expected to be completed within four to six weeks.

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/ Thomas DeLorenzo
Thomas DeLorenzo
Environmental Protection Specialist

Concur:

/s/ Sarah T. Biegel *June 9, 2023*
Sarah T. Biegel Date
NEPA Compliance Officer

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: Red River and Newsome Creek Watershed Projects

Project Site Description

Red River and Newsome Creek are major tributaries of the South Fork of the Clearwater River, itself the largest tributary of the Snake River. These rivers have been historical strongholds for ESA-listed salmonids, including steelhead trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*), Chinook salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*), and bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*). Historical agriculture practices, especially intensive grazing of livestock and cattle, have severely degraded habitat in much of the watershed and reduced the spawning and rearing habitat available to these fish species. The area surrounding the watersheds is rural, with few residences and businesses near project sites. Portions of both rivers run through the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest. The ecology of the watershed is typical of the Idaho Batholith ecoregion, dominated by temperate coniferous forests at higher elevations and shrubs and bunchgrasses in open areas, and receiving greater than average snowfall during winter months.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Maintenance and planting actions were reviewed under a previous contract by BPA cultural resources staff (BPA CR No. ID 2021 031). On June 9, 2021, BPA determined that the actions would result in no historic properties affected and initiated consultation with the Nez Perce Tribe and the Idaho State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). On June 23, 2021, SHPO concurred with the determination. No other responses were received. The consultation period ended on July 9, 2021. BPA cultural resources staff reviewed the actions proposed for this contract's implementation to ensure consistency with this determination (BPA CR No. ID 2023 001).

USFS is the lead Federal agency for National Historic Preservation Act compliance for the Trapper Creek culvert replacement project. USFS identified an Area of Potential Effects (APE) and, with assistance from cultural resources staff at the Tribe, conducted an intensive pedestrian survey of the area in the autumn of 2022. This survey did not identify any cultural resources within the APE. Additional background research into known cultural resources near the project site did not find any known cultural resources within the APE. USFS cultural resources staff determined that the project was excluded from further cultural resources review on January 31, 2023. A BPA archeologist reviewed USFS's documentation and determination (BPA CR No. ID 2023 015).

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be minor effects on geology and soils from project activities. Planting vegetation in the Red River Meadows management area would require excavating holes

large and deep enough to plant the trees. These holes would be backfilled with the soil excavated around the new plantings. While this would temporarily disturb the soil in the area down to a depth of a couple feet, the long-term effects of the project would be to develop a self-sustaining vegetation system that would help retain soil and improve conditions in the area.

Fence maintenance would require some minor ground disturbance. Replacing broken posts would potentially require digging new post holes. However, this disturbance would be limited to small areas for fence posts and the Tribe would seek to re-use existing holes as much as possible. New ground disturbance from fence maintenance is expected to be minimal.

The Trapper Creek culvert replacement would require excavation to remove the old culverts and install the new ones. These culverts run underneath an existing dirt and gravel USFS road. Excavation would be limited to removing this road. No large-scale excavation outside of the existing road prism would occur, and the road would be rebuilt using the same material following installation of the new culvert. Disturbed areas outside of the road prism would be re-seeded with native grass seed following excavation to restore vegetation systems to retain soil. No other ground disturbance would occur.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No ESA-listed plant species are located within the project areas (USFS Information for Planning and Consultation (IPaC) tool). No separately-listed Idaho state-listed plant species are present in the project areas (Idaho Governor's Office of Species Conservation).

There would only be mild effects on non-listed plant species in project areas. Existing riparian vegetation would be disturbed in the area that is being re-planted, but would be replaced by new, desirable vegetation. Grasses and encroaching vegetation would be trimmed and removed during vegetation maintenance, but effects would be minor, consistent with past vegetation maintenance practices, and aimed at improving conditions for desirable plant species. Other effects on vegetation, such as from general human presence, would be minor.

Notes:

- USFS is the lead Federal agency for compliance with the ESA for the Trapper Creek culvert replacement project. On May 5, 2023, USFS determined that there would be no significant effects on listed and sensitive plant species or their habitats from the culvert replacement project.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: ESA-listed Canada lynx (*Lynx canadensis*) can potentially be found in Idaho County, Idaho (IPaC). The project sites are not within the typical range of Canada lynx, which is usually only found in high elevation alpine forests. It is therefore extremely unlikely that Canada lynx would be found within the project areas or disturbed by project activities. Idaho State separately-listed species of concern North American wolverine (*Gulo gulo luscus*) has been occasionally observed in western Idaho County (Idaho Governor's Office of Species Conservation). Similarly to Canada lynx, wolverine prefer near-arctic climates that have reliable snow cover until late spring, typically confining it to higher elevations than the project sites. It is highly unlikely that wolverine would be found within the project areas or disturbed by project activities.

There would be mild effects on non-listed wildlife species in project areas. Wildlife would be disturbed from the effects of human presence and equipment used during project implementation, such as noise. These effects would be temporary and cause no negative

long-term effects on wildlife in the area. Project activities are focused on improving habitat along the Red River and Newsome Creek, which would have positive long-term effects on wildlife.

Notes:

- USFS is the lead Federal agency for compliance with the ESA for the Trapper Creek culvert replacement project. USFS proposed that ESA coverage for wildlife species under the jurisdiction of USFWS proceed under the USFS Restoration Activities at Stream Crossings in Idaho and Nevada programmatic ESA consultation (Stream Crossing Programmatic). USFWS determined on March 8, 2023, that the project is consistent with the Stream Crossing Programmatic for effects on ESA-listed wildlife species (USFWS Project code: 2023-0053593).

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: ESA-listed steelhead trout, Chinook salmon, and bull trout are present in both the Red River and Newsome Creek (IPaC, StreamNet Mapper). The streams and many of their tributaries are also listed as designated critical habitat for steelhead and bull trout. Fence maintenance, vegetation maintenance, and vegetation planting actions would have no effect on these fish. No work would take place in the water and would be limited to work along the banks and in upland areas. No dredge, fill, diversion, or other modification to the designated critical habitat would occur. To the extent that there are effects on these fish species from human presence and equipment used in project activities, such as noise, the effects would be temporary, minor, and cause no long-term negative impacts to fish. Vegetation projects would have long-term positive effects on fish habitat in Red River by improving the quality of riparian vegetation and therefore improving in-stream conditions for the fish. Effects on non-listed fish species in project areas would be identical to those outlined above.

The Trapper Creek culvert replacement project would require diverting the stream around the location of the culvert temporarily. Since the culverts are highly perched and prevent fish passage upstream of the project site, there are not expected to be fish in the area during project activities. USFS would additionally conduct staged dewatering of the project area and fish salvage to ensure that all fish, including ESA-listed species, are removed from the area before beginning implementation. All activities within the footprint of Trapper Creek would follow the limitations and proscriptions contained within USFS's programmatic biological opinions (see Notes below). The long-term effects of the culvert replacement would be beneficial to fish species by removing a passage barrier and restoring access to nearly two stream miles of new habitat above the locations of the culverts.

Notes:

- USFS is the lead Federal agency for compliance with the ESA for the Trapper Creek culvert replacement project. USFS proposed that ESA coverage for fish species under the jurisdiction of USFWS proceed under the USFS Stream Crossing Programmatic. USFWS determined on March 8, 2023, that the project is consistent with the Stream Crossing Programmatic for effects on ESA-listed bull trout. USFS additionally proposed that ESA coverage for fish species under the jurisdiction of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) proceed under the USFS Idaho Restoration Programmatic biological opinion (Idaho Restoration Programmatic). NMFS determined on February 27, 2023, that the project is consistent with the Idaho Restoration Programmatic for effects on ESA-listed Chinook salmon and steelhead trout (NMFS implementation number: WCR-2018-0000205483).

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No wetlands are present at the Trapper Creek culverts and their replacement would have no effect on wetlands (USFWS National Wetlands Inventory).

The banks of Newsome Creek host only small and sparsely spread mapped wetlands (USFWS National Wetlands Inventory). Vegetation maintenance along the stream would have minimal effects on these wetlands, limited to removing undesirable and encroaching vegetation to ensure the continued growth of desirable native plant species.

Extensive freshwater emergent wetlands are present along the banks of the Red River in the Red River Meadows management area (USFWS National Wetlands Inventory). Fence maintenance would have no effect on these wetlands. Vegetation maintenance would have minimal effects on the vegetation in these wetlands, limited to removing undesirable and encroaching vegetation to ensure the continued growth of desirable native plant species. Vegetation planting would remove existing vegetation in these wetlands and disturb the soil. However, the long-term effects would be to establish a riparian ecosystem of native trees and shrubs and improve the quality of the local wetlands, making the overall effects minor.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No new wells or groundwater use are proposed. Project activities would have no effect on local water tables.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No changes to existing land use are proposed. No changes in ownership or control of project areas would occur.

The Trapper Creek culvert replacement project would require closure of USFS Road #9560, under which the culverts run, during implementation. USFS would provide public notice via the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest website and postings at local field offices and ranger stations to inform the public that the road would be closed. No long-term changes to access would be made and the road closure is not expected to be longer than the four to six weeks that project implementation would take.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Fence maintenance, vegetation maintenance, and replacing the culverts on Trapper Creek would have little to no effect on the visual quality of the project areas. Vegetation planting would restore riparian woody vegetation to the lower Red River Meadows management area and return the visual quality of the area to its historical conditions.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be temporary increases in air pollution at project areas due to exhaust from project equipment, such as excavators and trucks. The effects would be limited in duration to implementation and would not result in any long-term impacts to air quality.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be temporary increases in noise at the project areas due to human presence and project equipment, such as excavators and trucks. The effects would be limited in duration to implementation and would not result in any long-term noise increases.

12. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: All personnel would use best management practices to ensure human health and safety. All machinery would be operated solely by licensed and trained professionals.

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: All project actions would take place on land that is either owned by the Tribe, owned by USFS, or upon which the Tribe holds a conservation easement. USFS would handle public notice for projects taking place on its land when required. No other external coordination would be required.

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

Signed: */s/ Thomas DeLorenzo* *June 9, 2023*
Thomas DeLorenzo Date
Environmental Protection Specialist