Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy

Proposed Action: North Fork Walla Walla River RM 3.6 Floodplain Restoration

Project No.: 2007-396-00

Project Manager: Joshua Ashline – EWL - 4

Location: Umatilla County, OR

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

Description of the Proposed Action: Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) proposes to fund the Walla Walla Watershed Basin Council to implement a river habitat restoration project on the North Fork Walla Walla River (NFWWR) to include installation of large wood structures, floodplain roughening, side channel alignment, and planting of riparian vegetation. The proposed actions would restore ecological function, and improve channel and floodplain connectivity, water quality, and habitat for ESA-listed species (including, spring Chinook salmon, steelhead, and bull trout). Funding the proposed activities fulfills ongoing commitments under the 2020 National Marine Fisheries Service Columbia River System Biological Opinion (2020 NMFS CRS BiOp) and commitments specified in the 2020 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Columbia River System BiOp (2020 FWS CRS BiOp), 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.)."

Wood Structure Installation: 25 log jams of various sizes, five apex jams, and 32 floodplain pinned logs would be constructed from locally sourced natural materials, and installed throughout the project area. Logs up to 40 feet in length would intertwined in and around excavated scour pools, up to approximately four to six feet in depth. The wood structures would then be backfilled, embedded, and ballasted in placed with boulders and/or log piles buried up to 16 feet in depth with a vibratory driver or backhoe excavator. Wood structures would provide habitat, reduce water velocity, and encourage floodplain and channel connectivity. Prior to construction, best management practices (BMP) would be used to isolate the work zone and control sediment and erosion.

Floodplain Roughening: The floodplain would be roughened in four areas totaling approximately one acre. An excavator would be used to scoop and deposit sediment methodically along the smooth and hardened floodplain, resulting in roughened ground with depressions and mounds. No additional sediment would be transported in or removed from the site. Roughening would reduce water velocity, promote fine sediment deposition, create microhabitats during flood events, and benefit riparian vegetation.

Channel Alignment: Excavator grading in strategic locations would connect the main stem of the river to a series of existing side channels and increase floodplain activation. Grading would occur in four locations and graded areas would be approximately eight feet wide, up to five feet in reduced elevation, and 80-300 feet in length. Excavated material would be used in other project activities.

Riparian Vegetation Planting: An estimated total of 1,140 feet of willow trenches would be incorporated in the process of wood structure installation and floodplain roughening. Trenches would be approximately three to four feet in depth, once in place, and the cuttings would be backfilled with excavated material. Live cuttings would also be planted on and around all wood structures and throughout the roughened floodplain. Established vegetation would be flagged for protection and vegetation removed during construction would be salvaged and replanted within the project site. Disturbed areas previously vegetated would be planted or reseeded with native species. Following planting, a temporary adjustable cattle exclusion fence would be positioned to protect newly planted vegetation. The fence would consist of metal T-post and wire and would be installed by hand.

The project would occur between July and September 2023, within the designated ODFW in-stream work window, during low flow conditions, when ESA-listed fish species are least likely to be present. Construction equipment would consist of pick-up trucks, dump trucks, excavators, power tools, and hand tools. All materials used in the restoration would be repurposed directly from the site or sourced from a local vendor. The site would be accessed by existing access roads and designated paths. Staging and stockpiling areas would be designated and flagged.

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 *July 18, 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.

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Project Site Description

The North Fork Walla Walla River (NFWWR) flows from its headwaters in the coniferous forested, western slopes of the Blue Mountains in northeast Oregon. The proposed project site is located in the valley bottom at 1,700 feet, approximately 10-miles south of Milton-Freewater, Oregon in Umatilla County. The project would occur on approximately 22 acres of private property along 0.8 miles of the NFWWR. Approximately five acres of ground disturbance would occur as a result of project activity. Past land management activities included grazing, timber harvesting, debris removal, and channel modification such as make-shift push-up dams, which has left the project reach ecologically non-functional. Additionally, the diminished river function has increased the severity of damage caused by high flow events. Although a stand of mature deciduous trees and some riparian tree species remain intact, high flow events have caused significant topsoil and riparian vegetation loss.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: BPA made a determination of no historic properties affected on May 1, 2023 (BPA CR Project No.: OR 2022 026), with the stipulation that a site identified as having potential of historical significance within the area of potential effect (APE) be avoided during implementation. BPA received an acknowledgement of the report from Oregon State Historic Preservation Office, but no further correspondence was received from the Nez Perce Tribe, or the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation with in the 30-day consultation period.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The installation of large wood structures, floodplain roughening, side channel alignment, and planting of riparian vegetation would disturb soils on the project site. Best Management Practices (BMP) have been developed to avoid or minimize temporary fine sediment impacts during construction. All ground disturbance would be stabilized and monitored throughout the length of implementation. The proposed project is expected to reduce water velocity, support soil stabilizing riparian vegetation growth, and promote the natural regeneration of topsoil. Overall, the project would have a positive impact on geology and soils.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No ESA-listed or special-status plant species are known to exist on the site. Areas impacted by the NFWWR restoration project would be restored by re-seeding and planting native vegetation to stabilize top soils, prevent introduction of invasive species, and improve habitat quality for both aquatic life and wildlife. Overall, this project would have a positive impact on vegetation conditions.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: According to US Fish and Wildlife Service's IPaC, presence of the gray wolf (ESA-listed endangered) may be possible in this region and the project reach is located within a cordon ODFW has designated as "Area of Known Wolf Activity" in Umatilla County. According to the project sponsor and long-time landowners, no wolf activity has been documented near the project area. Additionally, encounters at the project site would be highly unlikely as gray wolves are nocturnal and generally avoid human populated areas. Presence of a migratory USFWS Bird of Conservation Concern (BCC) species, Rufous hummingbird, may be possible at the proposed project site (USFWS IPaC.gov). However, no sightings have been documented within a three-mile radius of the project site (Ebird.org). In addition, presence is unlikely due to the degraded nature of the project site. No other ESA or special-status species have been documented within or near the project area. Non-listed wildlife in the project area would be disturbed by the effects of project activities, such as human presence and noise from equipment. Conservation measures would be used to minimize wildlife impacts. Wildlife that could be temporarily displaced during implementation would likely reoccupy the site following completion of the proposed activities. The proposed river restoration project is expected to improve aquatic and riparian habitat, which would have a beneficial effect to wildlife species in the long term.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The NFWWR restoration project would permanently alter a portion of the waterway and would disrupt aquatic life. Impacts to ESA-listed species, including steelhead, spring Chinook, and bull trout would be covered under the BPA's programmatic Habitat Improvement Program (HIP) biological opinion with the USFWS and NMFS. Construction activities would have temporarily effects such as: increased turbidity, habitat disturbances, and increased physiological stress to aquatic life. The project would be constructed during low flow and BMPs would be implemented to minimize impacts such as soil erosion, excess sediment downstream, and turbidity. Construction would be paused during runoff events. Work zone isolation and fish passage techniques would be used as needed but due to low-flow conditions, presence of ESA-listed fish or other species would be unlikely. In the long term, this project would improve water quality and habitat for ESA-listed and non-listed aquatic species.

The Walla Walla Basin Watershed Council (WWBWC) obtained the following permits:

- Clean Water Act (CWA) Section 404 permit under the Regional General Permit (RGP) 6 from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) on July 12, 2023. RGP-6 is covered by the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) under a CWA Section 401 Water Quality Certification for the Reissuance of Regional General Permit #6 with Modifications for Bonneville Power Administration Funded Habitat Improvement Projects – Corps No. NWP-2023-179
- Zone Permit from the Umatilla County Department of Land Use Planning on April 27, 2023, to fulfill the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) National Flood

Insurance Program (NFIP) ESA Section 7(a)(1) Conservation Action Program – Zone Permit no.: 23-081

- Removal-Fill Permit from the Oregon Department of State and Lands (DSL) on April 26, 2023, to satisfy Oregon Statutes (ORS), Chapter 196—Columbia River Gorge; Ocean Resource Planning; Wetlands; Removal and Fill-Section 196.795-990 – Permit No.: 64434-NP
- Fish Passage Approval from ODFW on June 6, 2023 – Approval #: PA-07-0047

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Wetlands were identified by the National Wetland Inventory (NWI) spatial data and a wetland survey was conducted for the NFWWR restoration project by Ecosystem Science, LLC on March 31, 2023. NWI identified approximately eight acres of riverine wetlands and Ecosystem Science's survey identified a total of 23 acres of permanent, temporary, and seasonal wetlands. Ground disturbance during the NFWWR restoration project would impact the wetlands on the project site. The proposed project is designed to promote main channel and floodplain connectivity, which would likely increase inundation within the floodplain and wetlands. Overall, the project would improve wetland function, abundance, and ecological value.

WWBWC has obtained Sections 404 and 401 permits for the proposed work under the USACE RGP-6 permit.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Although there would be ground disturbance as a result of the NFWWR restoration project, the work is not expected to substantially affect groundwater and aquifers. Groundwater recharge and water table levels would potentially improve as a result of increased water storage throughout the floodplain and wetland. The proposed project would either have no effect or a positive effect on groundwater and water tables.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No change in land use would occur as a result of the proposed NFWWR restoration project. The project is located on private agricultural land with a small water diversion. The water diversion system would remain unaffected and the landowner would maintain water rights. The proposed restoration project, both during construction and upon completion, would not impact any public use or recreation activities. Recreational opportunities in the upper NFWWR are very limited due to extreme low flows and habitat degradation. Additionally, the property is private with no public access.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed NFWWR restoration would have temporary and permanent changes to the landscape. Visual changes due to materials and equipment staging, vegetation disturbances, and human presence would be minor and short-term. Upon completion, changes such as increased riparian habitat, wetlands, and natural waterway structures would be permanent and overall improve visual quality. Approximately 0.8 miles of the

NFWWR and surrounding habitat would be permanently changed and restored to natural conditions.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: A temporary increase in emissions and dust from vehicles accessing the project site would be very minor and short term during construction, but would resume to normal conditions immediately once the project is completed.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed work would result in a temporary increase in ambient noise. Any noise emitted from construction equipment would be short term and temporary during daylight hours and would cease following project completion.

12. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed work is not considered hazardous nor does it result in any health or safety risks to the general public. There would be no soil contamination or hazardous conditions as a result of the proposed project.

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 Watershed Counsel and Jacobs and Cramer Fish Science developed and agreed upon the proposed actions collaboratively with the landowner. Construction schedules and mobilization of heavy equipment would be coordinated with the landowners.

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* *July 18, 2023*
Lindsey Arotin, ECF - 4 Date
Environmental Protection Specialist