

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy



Proposed Action: Grande Ronde Basin Aerial River Surveys

Project No.: 1992-026-01

Project Manager: Tracy Hauser – EWL-4

Location: Union and Wallowa Counties, Oregon

Categorical Exclusion Applied (from Subpart D, 10 C.F.R. Part 1021): B3.1 Site characterization and environmental monitoring, B3.2 Aviation activities

Description of the Proposed Action: Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) proposes to fund the Grande Ronde Model Watershed and the Nez Perce Tribe to subcontract with NV5, a geospatial survey firm which specializes in conducting aerial topographic surveys (collectively “the Sponsor”), to conduct site characterization surveys of rivers and streams in the Grand Ronde Basin using aircraft-mounted survey tools. The surveys would be used by the Sponsor to help inform future fish and wildlife habitat restoration actions in the watershed.

Funding for the proposed surveys would support conservation of ESA-listed species considered in the 2020 ESA consultations with both National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) on the operations and maintenance of the Columbia River System (CRS), while also supporting ongoing efforts to mitigate for effects of the CRS 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 (the Northwest Power Act) (16 U.S.C. 839 et seq.).

The Sponsor would conduct topographic surveys along roughly 15 miles of stream length of Chesnimnus Creek and 1.5 miles of the Wallowa River. The surveys would be completed using a Cessna 208B Grand Caravan fixed-wing aircraft equipped with groundward-facing light detection and ranging (LIDAR) and thermal infrared (TIR) equipment to record the topography of the streams and the surrounding floodplains out to roughly 50 meters from the channel. The equipment would also record habitat conditions in these rivers, including wood and sediment accumulation. The data gathered from the surveys would be compiled by the Sponsor into a topological model of the streams to be used for designing future restoration actions in the area and improving hydraulic modeling of the streams.

The Sponsor would also collect in-stream temperature measurements with flights along rivers throughout the Grande Ronde Basin. The Sponsor conducted aerial temperature measurements in 2010 across roughly 230 miles of streams across Union and Wallowa counties. Since then, a number of large-scale stream restoration projects have been completed in these rivers. Updated temperature measurements of these project sites would help assess the success of the projects, as well as to help identify areas in which future restoration actions should be prioritized. Temperature data would be collected using TIR equipment and compiled by the Sponsor into a map to compare with the 2010 data.

All surveys would be conducted in early-to-mid August when the streams are at their lowest average annual flow. Flights would be conducted at an altitude of no less than 400 meters (~1,100 feet) except during takeoff and landing. Roughly 5 to 6 hours of flight time would be needed to survey all locations, barring inclement weather or other interruptions. Flights would be based out of the local La Grande/Union County Airport (International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) airport code KLGD) in La Grande, Oregon. The nearby Lewiston-Nez Perce County Regional Airport (ICAO airport code KLWS) in Lewiston, Idaho, would be the backup location if the La Grande/Union County Airport is unavailable. All flight staging would use existing infrastructure and no temporary staging locations or ground disturbance would be required.

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.

Thomas DeLorenzo
Environmental Protection Specialist

Concur:

Sarah T. Biegel
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: Grande Ronde Basin Aerial River Surveys

Project Site Description

The Grande Ronde River is a major tributary to the Columbia River which drains large portions of the Columbia Plateau in northeastern Oregon. Historically, the Grande Ronde and its many tributaries in the area provided extensive spawning and rearing habitat for fish, including numerous species of Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed salmonids. Anthropogenic modification of many of these streams, such as channelization and irrigation withdrawals, heavily affected the quality of this habitat. Today, many of the streams host limited quality fish habitat, and some species such as coho salmon (*Oncorhynchus kisutch*) and Pacific lamprey (*Entosphenus tridentatus*) have been completely extirpated from the area. The area surrounding these streams hosts an arid climate dominated by bunchgrass prairie at lower elevations and forested mountain sides and subalpine tundra at higher elevations.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: A BPA archaeologist reviewed the proposed actions and determined that they would have no potential to affect historic and cultural resources (BPA CR No. OR 2024 169).

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be no ground disturbance. Aircraft would be based out of existing airports and use existing infrastructure. Flights would be at an altitude of at least 400 meters, far above any noticeable ground disturbance that would be caused by the aircraft.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There are no ESA-listed plant species present in the survey area (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Information for Planning and Consultation (IPaC) tool). No Oregon state plant species of concern would be present in the survey areas (Oregon Department of Agriculture). There would be no effect on listed species.

Non-listed species would not be affected by the flights. Aircraft would fly at an altitude far above the local vegetation. The LIDAR and TIR equipment used for surveys would not affect plants.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: ESA-listed grey wolf (*Canis lupus*) has been regularly observed in the area (IPaC).

The flights would be at an altitude above which there would be any effects on wolves. Wolves generally avoid human presence and noise and would be extremely unlikely to be found at or near the airports from which flights would be based. Therefore, there would be no effect on wolves. No other Oregon state wildlife species of concern are present in the survey area (Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife).

Non-listed terrestrial species would not be affected by the surveys. The flights would be at an altitude at which noise at ground level would be unnoticeable. The LIDAR and TIR equipment used for surveys would not affect terrestrial wildlife. Terrestrial wildlife present at or near the airport during takeoff and landing may be temporarily disturbed by noise, but the effects would be consistent with typical conditions in the area.

Non-listed avian species would be mildly affected by the flights. Noise and exhaust from the aircraft would disturb avian species flying in the survey paths, but these effects would be temporary. There would be a small chance of collision between the aircraft and avian species, but these types of mid-air collisions are very rare and would be avoided to the greatest extent possible for the safety of both operators and wildlife. Effects on avian species would therefore be low.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: ESA-listed Chinook salmon (*O. tshawytscha*), steelhead (*O. mykiss*), and bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) are present in both the Wallowa River and Chesminus Creek (IPaC, StreamNet Mapper). Surveys would have no effect on these fish or their habitat. The LIDAR and TIR equipment used for surveys would not affect fish or local waterbodies. The surveys would not modify the existing conditions of the streams. No other Oregon state aquatic species of concern are present in the survey area (Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife).

The effects on non-listed fish species would be functionally identical.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Wetlands are present along the banks of many of the stream locations that would be surveyed. No actions would affect these wetlands. The aircraft would fly at an altitude far above which any noticeable effects on wetlands would occur. The LIDAR and TIR equipment used for surveys would not affect wetlands.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No actions would involve any interaction with groundwater or aquifers.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Flights would be based out of existing public airports. No changes to this existing infrastructure would be required. Under Federal law, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has the sole jurisdiction over airspaces above the regulatory minimum safe altitude of flight. Flights would be conducted at an altitude at which the FAA is the sole authority and coordination with landowners over which the aircraft would fly would not be required. The Sponsor would file flight plans with the FAA prior to any flights and fulfill all regulatory requirements for use of this airspace. No changes to ownership or land use would occur.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No actions would have any effect on the visual quality of the project areas.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The aircraft used for conducting the surveys would produce exhaust. The exhaust generated would be consistent with current activity at the airport. Exhaust would be temporary along flight paths and cause no long-term effects on air quality.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The aircraft used for conducting the surveys would produce noise. This noise would be consistent with current activity at the airport. Noise would be temporary along flight paths and cause no long-term effects to the local area.

12. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: All personnel would use best practices to ensure human health and safety. Only certified and licensed individuals would operate aircraft and equipment as required by Federal law. All aircraft would be registered with the FAA and certified for airworthiness as required by Federal law. FAA regulations additionally require that the Sponsor file flight plans prior to conducting any flights for safety and oversight.

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 Sponsor would coordinate with the airport for use of their facilities. Under Federal law, the FAA is the sole authority for control of airspace at altitudes at which flights would take place. The Sponsor would file appropriate notice and flight plans with the FAA prior to any flights. No other landowner 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:

Thomas DeLorenzo
Environmental Protection Specialist