

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy



Proposed Action: South Fork Cowiche Creek Floodplain Restoration Project

Project No.: 1997-051-00

Project Manager: Jennifer Lord, EWU-4

Location: Yakima County, Washington

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 Yakama Nation (YN) to complete phases I, II, III, and IV of floodplain restoration on the South Fork (SF) Cowiche Creek floodplain between river miles (RM) 9.5 and RM 12.6 in Yakima County in Washington. The proposed project would benefit ESA-listed steelhead, bull trout, and Chinook salmon as well as resident fish species.

The proposed project would include the implementation of a series of beaver dam analogs (BDAs) and post assisted log structures (PALS), as well as native riparian planting and seeding, with the goal to imitate the influence that historic beaver populations had on the riverscape form and function. These actions would occur across four project reaches within RMs 9.5 to 12.6 on Cowiche Creek. The primary limiting factors include limited floodplain connectivity, limited side-channel or off-channel habitat, stream incision, and limited pool structure and frequency. Reconnecting flood channels and promoting overbank flow would increase off-channel habitat and adding structural elements would increase geomorphic and hydraulic complexity, improve sediment sorting, and reduce sediment and woody debris transport time. These activities would also increase high flow and predator refuge for fish and create more suitable rearing habitat.

Fifteen BDAs would be installed along SF Cowiche Creek in four reaches between RMs 9.5 and 12.6. All BDAs would be located within the ordinary high water. BDA structures would consist of small diameter at breast height (DBH) trees (<10 inches DBH) and woody debris. Excavation of material would occur using hand-tools (shovels, picks, prybars, and buckets) and excavated materials would then be replaced in the floodplain in a way that would promote ponding during low-flow conditions. The stream bed would be scoured using hand-tools and buckets to build subsequent layers of substrate between wooden posts into BDA formations. Fill materials would not be removed from the floodplain or streambed, all fill would be rearranged and incorporated into each BDA. Fine woody debris and sediment would be placed by hand between layers. BDAs would be post-assisted where up to 25 untreated wooden posts would be installed into the stream bed using a hand-held post pounder. BDAs built as channel spanning would not exceed two feet in height and all other BDAs (i.e., non-channel spanning) would not exceed three feet in height.

Twenty-five PALS would be installed along SF Cowiche Creek in four reaches between RMs 9.5 and 12.6. PALS installation would consist of untreated wooden posts that would be inserted into the stream by using a hand-held post-pounder. Each PALS structure would consist of approximately 4 to 25 posts depending on the width of the stream at the installation locations, plus the addition of several pieces of woody debris that would be woven in between the posts by hand. Posts would penetrate roughly 2 to 3 feet into the stream bed at each structure. Chainsaws, handsaws, sledgehammers, shovels, and drills may also be used in the installation of the PALS. An ATV/UTV and pickup trucks would be utilized to access the site via Cowiche Mill Road, adjacent to the stream. Installers would cut back some vegetation to access the creek for structure installation.

YN would conduct adaptive management actions for multiple years post-implementation to assure project functionality continues. YN would add materials to enhance structural integrity and provide enhanced structure functions across the entirety of the project areas and reaches. YN would add length across the channel to structures to accommodate for stream bank migration so that the structures meet their intended purpose after channel migration. Structures would be assessed for adequate flow or passage, sections becoming dislodged and transported off site, ecological function, and orientation to flow.

In the years after wood installation, YN would implement riparian plantings where natural recruitment is inadequate. Additionally, site restoration measures would include seeding and planting of native riparian vegetation at disturbed areas. Planting would consist of hydro-seeding, drill seeding, harrowing, or by hand. Riparian species would include on-site native willows and dogwoods, and the seed mix would include locally adapted native grasses and forbs.

Funding the proposed actions supports commitments under the 2020 ESA consultations with both National Marine Fisheries Service and US Fish and Wildlife Service on the ongoing operations and maintenance of the Columbia River System Operations. These actions also support Bonneville's commitments under the 2022 Columbia River Fish Accord Extension agreement, while also supporting ongoing efforts to mitigate for 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.).

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.

Catherine Clark
Environmental Protection Specialist

Concur:

Katey C. Grange
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: South Fork Cowiche Creek Floodplain Restoration Project

Project Site Description

SF Cowiche Creek is a tributary to the Naches River in Yakima County, Washington. The drainage is a 5th order stream within the Water Resource Inventory Area 38 – Naches. Sections of SF Cowiche, RM 9.5 to 12.6, is owned and managed by Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW). Previously conducted work has been completed downstream from this reach, which included projects that removed fish passage barriers, floodplain levee removal, and in-stream habitat improvement projects, which have been implemented by Yakama Nation, WDFW, and Mid-Columbia Fisheries Enhancement Group. Prior to WDFW purchase of this project area it was utilized for cattle grazing up to the creek bed; however, WDFW implemented riparian fencing to protect the riparian zone and grazing continues in adjacent lands to the riparian zone. Degradation throughout the drainage can be attributed to legacy logging activity, roads, beaver removal, grazing, and agricultural development.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No with Conditions

Explanation: BPA determined that the implementation of the proposed project would result in no historic properties affected (WA 2023 112). BPA notified Washington Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation (DAHP), the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation (YN) on May 10, 2024. DAHP concurred with BPA's determination on May 15, 2024. No additional responses from consulting parties were received within 30 days.

Notes:

- In the event that archaeological or historic materials are discovered during project activities, work in the immediate vicinity must stop, the area be secured, and the concerned tribe's cultural staff and cultural committee and DAHP notified.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: BDA implementation would not exceed 0.25 cubic yards of fill per structure. No fill would be removed or disposed of during installation.

The installation of the PALS would temporarily 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 native seeding and planting would occur post-construction.

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. Vegetation may be cut back to access sections of the stream or trampled during implementation of structures. Areas that are disturbed would be revegetated with native plant species.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Wildlife may be temporarily disturbed and displaced by human presence and installation noise from the intermittent use of hand tools during implementation. This project area is in the known range or expected range of gray wolf (*Canis lupus*), North American wolverine (*Gulo gulo luscus*), Mt. Rainier white-tailed ptarmigan (*Lagopus leucura rainierensis*), and yellow-billed cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*). There would be potential for activities to temporarily displace ESA-listed and state special status wildlife species due to human presence and installation noise during implementation; however, the displacement would be minor and short term. In the long term, this project was designed to increase habitat complexity and increase floodplain inundation which would increase riparian vegetation. Project related impacts to ESA-listed species are addressed in BPA's Habitat Improvement Program (HIP) biological opinions with USFWS.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Fish in the work area would be subject to temporary, small pulses of turbidity as post holes are excavated. The project is covered under the Habitat Improvement Program (HIP) Biological Opinion (BiOp) under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act. Listed fish species include Mid-Columbia River steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*), bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*), and Chinook salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*) and their critical habitat. The project plans were reviewed by BPA engineering technical services and a series of conservation measures in accordance with the HIP consultation would be implemented to ensure that the project would minimize impacts and benefit in the long term ESA-listed fish species.

Rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) and cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarkii clarkii*) are known to utilize Cowiche Creek. The planned conservation measures would ensure that the project would also limit potential impacts and benefit non-ESA-listed fish species and the waterbody. In the long term, this project was designed to increase fish habitat complexity.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Ground disturbance during the implementation of PALS and BDAs would involve pounding posts in the ground and digging holes for vegetation plantings in wetlands on the project site. No excavation or other ground disturbance would occur. 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.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Ground-disturbing activities are not likely to intersect with groundwater and would have no impact on aquifers. Construction BMPs would be implemented to prevent contamination of groundwater from equipment leaks or spills.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The project is located on WDFW property that is used for habitat conservation and is used minimally by the public during hunting seasons. The project would not impede use and no long term changes to land use would occur.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Minor changes to visual quality. The new BDAs and PALS would be visually consistent with adjacent vegetation and topography of the proposed structures would not be located in a visually sensitive area.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Temporary increase in emissions and dust from vehicles accessing the site during construction activities.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Temporary increase in ambient noise during construction. 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 activities are not considered hazardous nor would result in any health and safety risks to the general public.

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: YN would work with WDFW for access to all project sites and implementation for project components.

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

Signed:

Catherine Clark
Environmental Protection Specialist