

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy



Proposed Action: Lower Snake River Salmon Population Assessment

Project No.: 2002-053-00

Project Manager: Russell Scranton, EWP-4

Location: Asotin, Columbia, Garfield, and Whitman counties, Washington

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

Description of the Proposed Action: Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) proposes to fund Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) to conduct salmon population monitoring and evaluation. Monitoring activities would include trapping adult and juvenile fish, marking and tagging fish, collecting biological samples from fish, operating and maintaining Passive Integrated Transponder (PIT) tag detection systems (arrays), and conducting redd surveys. WDFW would use collected data to assess abundance, productivity, survival rates, and distribution of Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed salmonid populations in Asotin Creek, Tucannon River, and lower Snake River. The primary focus would be on ESA-listed Snake River (SR) steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*), but the project would also collect data on SR Chinook salmon (*O. tshawytscha*) and Columbia River Basin bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*).

WDFW would install, operate, and maintain five temporary fish traps on private land in the following locations:

- **Asotin Creek** - An adult weir and juvenile rotary screw trap would be placed instream approximately 100 meters (m) apart. The adult weir would be anchored to the creek substrate with metal pins and duckbill anchors. Trapping components would be instream except for two deflector fences (less than 10 feet in length) that extend from the weir toward each shore to funnel water back into the stream and over the weir in the event of high water. All components would be within the high-water mark.

The juvenile rotary screw trap would be installed downstream of the adult weir. This trap would float in the creek and be anchored to two existing points with cables from winches on the pontoons of the trap. One anchor is attached to an exposed cliff face on the shore, 20 m upstream and 10 m above the high-water mark. The other is located 20 m upstream attached to a dike. Both anchors are above ground and drilled into exposed rock. The anchors have been in place for approximately 15 years and were installed without excavation. Connection of the cables to the anchors would not require ground disturbance or the removal of any vegetation.

- **George Creek** – An adult weir would be anchored to the creek substrate with metal pins and duckbill anchors. A minimal amount of instream substrate would be moved to install a rail and trap box. All trap components would be below the high-water mark.

- Tenmile Creek - An adult fixed-picket weir with a trap box would be placed instream and anchored with sandbags. All components would be below the high-water mark.
- Alpowa Creek - An adult weir would be placed instream and anchored with sandbags placed on the substrate. All components would be below the high-water mark.

Adult weirs would typically be installed in early to mid-February and operated until late May or early June. The juvenile rotary screw trap would be operated for two periods throughout the year – January to June and October to December. Traps would be checked daily, and any fish trapped would be processed and released at that time. WDFW would collect biological data and tissue or scale samples from steelhead and Chinook salmon. Juveniles would be PIT-tagged and possibly marked with another type of tag and/or fin clipped. Collection of data and samples and marking/tagging of fish would occur on site using equipment brought in and removed daily by foot or in trucks. All work to install, operate, and maintain traps, as well as data collection and marking/tagging fish, would occur without excavation or removal of vegetation. Sites would be accessed using existing roads and trails.

WDFW would also conduct redd or spawning ground surveys in selected tributaries in Asotin Creek and the Tucannon River when weir operation is not possible or effective, or where information on spawning distribution is limited. The work would involve crews walking along stream banks on public lands to identify locations and count redds in the streams. There would be no in-water work or ground disturbing activities.

WDFW would operate and provide regular maintenance for existing seasonal instream PIT tag arrays located on public and private lands in tributaries to the Snake River, including Couse, Penawawa, Almota, Alkali Flat, Pataha, and Deadman creeks, and at four locations on the mainstem Tucannon River. Arrays have already been installed (instream) under prior contracts and the proposed work would not require any ground disturbance. An array consists of multiple PIT tag antennas in one or two rows that span the stream and collect directional PIT tag data from migrating fish. For all PIT tag arrays, a metal box located on the nearby bank and above the high-water mark would house batteries to supply power to the system and PIT tag readers connected to the array with cables that were buried in trenches at the time of installation. Crews would remotely monitor all mainstem sites daily to ensure data is being captured. They would visit each site at least once per month to remove debris and ensure antennas and cables are still secure. If needed, crews would replace broken or lost antennas, cables, and hardware and provide other maintenance as needed. Crews would also collect flow and temperature data at the array sites. Sites would be accessed using existing roads and trails.

Funding the proposed actions would fulfill commitments under the 2020 ESA consultations with the National Marine Fisheries Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on the operations and maintenance of the Columbia River Power System 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.

Jacquelyn Schei
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.

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Project Site Description

All project sites would be in southeast Washington. Fish trapping sites would be located on private lands in the Asotin Creek subbasin. For PIT tag array operation and maintenance and redd surveys, crews would access sites in the Asotin Creek, Tucannon River, and lower Snake River subbasins through public or private land depending on agreements with private landowners. Public access to streams would include roadsides, the Tucannon Wildlife Area and Fish Hatchery, and campgrounds. The privately-owned land in the subbasins is mainly used for agriculture or cattle operations. Anadromous and resident fish are present in all the subbasins. The land surrounding project sites primarily consists of shrub-steppe grasslands with thin strips of riparian vegetation along streams.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Effects of instream trapping equipment (adult weirs and juvenile rotary screw trap) was assessed during the original installation (BPA CR Project No. WA 2020 125 – No Potential to Affect Historic Properties, March 23, 2020; BPA CR Project No. WA 2022 034 – No Potential to Affect Historic Properties, November 29, 2021). No new ground disturbance would occur during the reinstallation of weirs, operation and maintenance of previously installed PIT tag arrays, and fish processing.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Proposed actions would not involve ground disturbance. All proposed trapping and PIT tag array sites have been used in the past. Vehicles would travel on existing roads and crews would use existing trails to access sites and would not have the potential to affect geology and soils.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The Spalding's catchfly (*Silene spaldingii*), ESA-listed as Threatened, has the potential to be in the project area. There are no known occurrences of Spalding's catchfly in the project areas. Therefore, no ESA-listed species would be affected by the project. There are no state special-status plant species documented in the project area. Minor and temporary vegetation disturbances may occur as part of the proposed actions if vegetation in the riparian areas has encroached on existing trails or areas on the banks where crews

set up for fish processing. There would be no plant removal or cutting and effects would be temporary in nature.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The yellow-billed cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*), ESA-listed as Threatened, has the potential to be in the project area; however, there is no critical habitat and no known occurrences of the species in the project area. Therefore, no ESA-listed species would be affected by the project. The monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*), an ESA Candidate species, also has the potential to be present in the project area. Minor impacts may occur due to human presence, but these would be short-term and temporary and would not affect food sources or habitat. The gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) is classified as Washington-state listed endangered. WDFW indicates there are wolf packs that have ranges in Asotin, Garfield, Columbia, and Walla Walla counties in southeast Washington. However, WDFW information on packs in these counties indicates the territories are close to the Oregon-Washington border and largely within the Umatilla National Forest (Forest). Project sites would be farther north and not in the Forest, so would not overlap with wolf pack territories and have no effect on the species.

There would be disturbances to non-listed wildlife due to human presence. Work would occur in small areas, for short durations of time, and would not modify any wildlife habitat, so impacts would be minor and temporary.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Instream equipment would change stream flows around equipment and debris may collect on equipment over time. Debris would be routinely removed by crews and there would be no blockage of the usual stream flow or change to water quantity or quality due to the proposed actions. Therefore, proposed actions would not impact water bodies or floodplains.

Project activities would involve the direct and indirect take of ESA-listed species, including steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*), Chinook salmon (*O. tshawytscha*), and bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*). WDFW would conduct work in accordance with the terms, conditions, and requirements of their National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries Section 7 Determination of Take Authorization under the 2020 Columbia River System Biological Opinion for take of ESA-listed steelhead and Chinook salmon and their US Fish and Wildlife Service Section 6 Cooperative Agreement for take of ESA-listed bull trout. Proposed actions would not have impacts to critical habitats for these species. Despite short-term adverse impacts from handling, overall impacts would be beneficial to ESA-listed species.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be no ground disturbance or modifications to the channel in project locations, so no potential to impact wetlands.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be no ground disturbance in project locations, so no potential to impact groundwater or aquifers.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No changes in land use would occur because of the proposed actions.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Fish traps would be installed in streams, would sit low on the horizon, and occupy a small area of each stream. PIT tag arrays would be completely submerged except for a small box on the stream bank housing the power and data recorder. Proposed fish processing would occur on a small area of land next to the bank for a short duration and processing equipment would be brought in and carried out daily. There would be little potential to impact visual quality.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be short-term effects from the use of vehicles generating exhaust and dust. The emissions would be for a short time and consistent in amount and duration with routine vehicle use on the roads used to access project sites. There would be no long-term effects to air quality.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Noise from vehicles and field crews is anticipated. The noise would be for a short duration and during daylight hours only. This noise would be temporary and cause no long-term impacts.

12. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed project would use sharp tools and anesthesia during fish processing. WDFW would follow standard protocols and train field crews on proper fish processing techniques, as well as on general safety guidelines for field crews. The proposed activities are not considered hazardous, nor would they result in any health risks to the 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: WDFW has agreements in place with private landowners to access properties for the proposed work. If it is not possible to get private landowner agreements, WDFW would forgo the work on that property and coordinate with state and/or federal land managers to conduct work on public lands.

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

Signed:

Jacquelyn Schei
Environmental Protection Specialist