Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy

Proposed Action: Convert Irrigation Diversion to Groundwater Wells on the Lemhi River

Project No.: 2010-072-00

Project Manager: Eric Leitzinger, EWM - 4

Location: Lemhi County, Idaho

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 Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) to install up to two wells on private property near Baker, Idaho, and remove the landowner's in-stream irrigation diversion on the Lemhi River. Converting surface water withdrawals to subsurface irrigation using wells would result in in-stream water savings that would benefit Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed Chinook salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*), steelhead (*O. mykiss*), and bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus)*.

The property, approximately 10 acres in size, is flood irrigated with surface water withdrawals from the Lemhi River throughout the spring, summer, and fall. IDFG would drill up to two groundwater wells using a truck-mounted well drill rig. Each well would be drilled to a depth of approximately 30 to 100 feet. The lower 10 feet would be cased and screened. New pumps, well heads and outlet piping, and electrical wire would be installed; the wells would be connected to grid power that is available onsite. Costs for operation and maintenance of the pumps and well infrastructure would be the responsibility of the landowner post-installation. Excess excavated materials would be spoiled onsite per the landowner's request. The existing irrigation diversion is a gated ditch and IDFG would remove the gate in the dry using hand tools.

Funding the proposed activities fulfills commitments under the 2020 National Marine Fisheries Service Columbia River System Biological Opinion (BiOp) and the 2020 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Columbia River System BiOp. These actions also support BPA's commitments to the State of Idaho in the Columbia River Fish Accord, as amended, 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; 89 FR 34074, April 30, 2024), 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. [1]

JACQUELYN SCHEI

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Environmental Protection Specialist

Concur:

KATEY GRANGE

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NEPA Compliance Officer

Attachment(s): Environmental Checklist

[1] BPA is aware that the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), on February 25, 2025, issued an interim final rule to remove its NEPA implementing regulations at 40 C.F.R. Parts 1500–1508. Based on CEQ guidance, and to promote completion of its NEPA review in a timely manner and without delay, in this CX BPA is voluntarily relying on the CEQ regulations, in addition to DOE's own regulations implementing NEPA at 10 C.F.R. Part 1021, to meet its obligations under NEPA, 42 U.S.C. §§ 4321 *et seq*.

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: Convert Irrigation Diversion to Groundwater Wells on the Lemhi River

Project Site Description

The project area is located within the Lemhi River Valley on private property in Lemhi County, Idaho. The project area is generally flat at an elevation approximately 4,300 feet above sea level. The Lemhi River, a tributary of the Salmon River, passes through the valley and is extensively used for irrigation. Vegetation consists of grasses, sagebrush, cottonwoods, willows, cattails, and sedges. The project area is in a residential-agricultural area and land use is primarily agriculture and grazing.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No with Conditions

Explanation: On February 18, 2025, BPA sent a letter of correspondence and a cultural resources survey report prepared by Sundance Consulting for IDFG, to the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes of the Fort Hall Reservation and the Idaho State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) describing the proposed project, the area of potential effects, and the results of the field survey (BPA No. ID 2024 053). No historic properties were identified as a result of background research or the field survey. Therefore, BPA determined a finding of no historic properties affected. On February 21, 2025, the Idaho SHPO provided concurrence with BPA's finding. On March 20, 2025, the 30-day response period expired. No other comments were received from consulting parties.

Notes:

- In the unlikely event that cultural material is inadvertently encountered during the implementation of this project, BPA would require that work be halted in the vicinity of the finds until they can be inspected and assessed by BPA and in consultation with the appropriate consulting parties.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Minimal effects to geology and soils would occur associated with well drilling, transport of equipment to the work site, and removal of the irrigation diversion gate. Soil would be displaced during well drilling and gate removal and compacted or displaced by vehicles and equipment. Compaction and erosion potential associated with the transport activities is expected to be minimal as vehicles would use existing access roads and would then drive across small grassy areas to reach the work sites. Additionally, standard best management practices would be implemented to reduce soil erosion and sedimentation. Well drilling sites would be returned to the original grade to the extent possible using native soil from the drilling.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There are no Federal or state special-status plant species or habitats in the project area. Minor and temporary vegetation disturbances from vehicles and equipment crushing plants while accessing work areas are expected. This would not have long-term impacts to plant communities.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There are no Federally-listed or state special-status wildlife species or their habitats known to occur in the project area. The USFWS Information for Planning and Conservation (IPaC) tools lists the Canada lynx (*Lynx canadensis*) and North American wolverine (*Gulo gulo luscus*), both ESA-listed Threatened, as having the potential to be in the project area. In addition, IPac lists the monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*), ESA-proposed Threatened, and Suckley's cuckoo bumble bee (*Bombus suckleyi*), ESA-proposed Endangered, as having the potential to be present in the project area. There are no critical habitats for ESA-listed or proposed species in the project area and no confirmed presence of any of the species in the project area. In addition, due to current agricultural lands surrounding the site, nearby residences, and proximity of Highway 28 to the project area (approximately 0.25 mile), it is unlikely these species would be present in the project area.

Wildlife present during project activities may be temporarily disturbed by human presence and noise, but this is expected to be minor given that the location of the project site is adjacent to an existing paved road and agricultural lands. Local wildlife would likely avoid the area during implementation and return once the project work is completed. Disturbance and/or displacement would be temporary, localized, minor and cause no lasting impact to wildlife.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The Lemhi River contains ESA-listed bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*), Chinook salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*), and steelhead (*O. mykiss*) and their designated critical habitat; however, project activities would occur in the floodplain and upland areas and would not affect these species or their habitats. The proposed wells are replacements for an existing point of diversion and would result in instream water savings due to a switch from flood irrigation practices to subsurface water delivery on the land. The irrigation gate would be removed in the dry.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There is a wetland along the Lemhi River that extends approximately 130 feet from the river toward and partially overlapping the project area. This wetland is classified as a forest/shrub wetland according to the USFWS National Wetlands Inventory. Forest/shrub wetlands typically consist of an overstory of trees, an understory of young trees or shrubs, and an herbaceous layer. During low flows, it is expected that the ground in this area would be dry. Access to the irrigation gate would be on an existing path on the landowner's

property that extends into this wetland zone and the gate would be removed in the dry, therefore, the project would have minor impacts on the wetland. In the long term, the proposed actions would help return the wetland area to a more natural state. In the long term, it is expected that vegetation would reoccupy the area where the gate was removed.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No with Conditions

Explanation: The wells would replace the existing point of diversion and replace surface water withdrawals with groundwater withdrawals. The conversion would not change the timing of irrigation but is expected to reduce the amount withdrawn. Because the wells would be closer than one-quarter mile to the Lemhi River, there is the potential to lower the water table below river level with excessive pumping. However, the intent is to reduce overall water use on the property by converting flood irrigation practices that divert surface flow from the Lemhi River to subsurface groundwater irrigation. Subsurface irrigation is more controlled and efficient and would overall use less water, so impacts of the project on groundwater and aquifers would be minor.

Information from the Idaho Department of Water Resources (IDWR) indicates that the project area is not located in a state-designated Critical Groundwater Area, which would indicate that the groundwater basin cannot provide a reasonably safe supply for irrigation or other uses at the current or projected rates of withdrawal. The project area is also not within a state-designated Area of Drilling Concern where there are known occurrences of waste or contamination.

Notes:

- The project would follow all IDWR requirements for drilling of groundwater wells in Idaho.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The underlying land use would not change and there would be no impact to specially-designated areas as a result of this project.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Short-term changes to visual quality would occur from construction activities and presence of vehicles and equipment, but would return to near pre-project conditions when the project is complete.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Minor, temporary generation of emissions associated with the use of well drilling equipment would occur but would return to normal conditions once the project is completed.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Noise associated with well drilling and associated equipment and vehicles would be generated during daylight hours for the duration of the project. This would be minor and

temporary and not expected to exceed regular, ambient noise levels from the nearby road or agricultural machinery operating in the area.

12. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed work is not considered hazardous, nor would it result in any health or safety risks to the general public. There would be no soil contamination or hazardous conditions. All personnel would use best management practices to protect worker health and safety.

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 project site is located on private property and IDFG has secured permission from the landowner to perform the work.

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

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