

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy



Proposed Action: Warren Slough Railroad Restoration

Project No.: 2010-004-00

Project Manager: Jason Karnezis, EWL – 4

Location: Clatsop 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 Columbia River Estuary Study Taskforce (CREST) to implement a channel reconnection project on private and state-owned land in Clatsop County, Oregon. The project aims to restore and enhance tidal wetland ecosystem functions and fish access for Endangered Species Act (ESA) listed salmonids to important foraging and rearing habitat that has been heavily modified by past and current land uses.

The project would reestablish floodplain connectivity and restore unrestricted salmonid access to 22 acres of essential off-channel wetland habitat along the Lower Columbia River Estuary. Key restoration actions include:

- 1) Breaching the railroad embankment at a location where two perched culverts currently exist and replacing the undersized culverts with a 60-foot-long channel-spanning bridge, fully restoring tidal exchange and unrestricted fish passage;
- 2) Excavating tidal channels to reconnect existing waterways, increasing wetland capacity and hydrologic connectivity; the channel would be approximately 58 feet long before tying into the existing channels, and approximately 30 feet wide at the bottom from toe to toe;
- 3) Utilizing native soils from excavation to bury invasive Reed Canary Grass and create a suite of elevations capable of supporting spruce and other native woody plants, without converting wetland types; and
- 4) Enhancing native vegetation by promoting scrub-shrub and spruce swamp communities, increasing plant diversity, prey availability, and improving edge habitat complexity. CREST would seed the replant the area heavily with native riparian species including willow, Douglas spirea, twinberry, Pacific ninebark, and red osier dogwood; as well as planting spruce at the few locations.

To facilitate work at the railroad breach, CREST would construct an elevated temporary bridge using pilings to minimize wetland impacts. This bridge would extend approximately 165 feet from Ziak-Gnat Creek Road directly to the railroad breach location. Most of the work would be performed by cranes and excavators parked on top of the existing railroad berm, proposed temporary access bridge, or from within the proposed vegetation complexity mound footprints.

All efforts would be made to avoid unnecessary tracking of equipment and compaction of soils. On the railroad tracks, wood timbers would be placed on both sides and in the middle of the rails to protect them from equipment. In the instances that equipment needs to work off the railroad berm, large wood swamp mats would be laid out to minimize compaction of soils. The side slopes and all disturbed soils would be reseeded with native grasses and replanted with native riparian plants after construction activities have concluded.

Funding the proposed activities fulfills commitments under the 2020 National Marine Fisheries Service Columbia River System Biological Opinion (2020 NMFS CRS BiOp). These proposed activities also fulfill 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.).

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

Shawn Skinner
Environmental Protection Specialist

Concur:

Katey C. Grange
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.

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Project Site Description

The Warren Slough project area is located at approximately river mile 23 of the Columbia River Estuary in Clatsop County, Oregon. The existing conditions at the Warren Slough site interrupt natural tidal wetland processes and present an access impediment/barrier to ESA listed salmon. The railroad corridor bisects the floodplain and has two pairs of culverts that are perched, restricting tidal flow and fish access for the majority of the tidal cycle. The railroad has not been active since 2003.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: BPA made a determination of no adverse effect to historic properties on May 16, 2024 (OR 2024 076). BPA consulted with the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians, Shoalwater Bay Tribe, Chinook Indian Nation, and Oregon State Historic Preservation Office. Concurrence was received from the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office (June 14, 2024). BPA did not receive comments from any of the other consulting parties within 30 days. On March 21, 2025, BPA made a determination of no adverse effect to historic properties in a letter sent to the consulting parties regarding an area of potential effect amendment. BPA did not receive any comments from the consulting parties within the 30 days.

Notes:

- In the event any archaeological material is encountered during project activities, work would be stopped immediately and a BPA Archaeologist and Historian would be notified, as well as consulting parties.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Temporary, minor impacts to soil may occur from potential increased erosion during construction and grading activities. Sediment control Best Management Practices (BMPs) would be installed prior to project implementation to minimize potential for in-stream turbidity or excessive runoff during construction. Work areas would be isolated to prevent increased levels of erosion or turbidity.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No Federal/state special-status plant species are known to be present. Some clearing of vegetation may be necessary on the railroad itself where it has become overgrown and for access to the site. Clearing of existing vegetation would be strategically designed to minimize impacts to the maximum extent practicable to provide access. There would be a

long-term benefit by restoring the project area to a more natural condition through the treatment of invasive plants and replanting with native plants.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No Federal/state special-status wildlife species are known to be present. Minor, short-term disturbance to local wildlife would occur due to noise associated with construction and human presence. There would be long-term benefits to restoring the project area to a more natural condition and restoring habitat for local wildlife.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: ESA-listed fish in proximity to the project area include coho, Chinook, chum, steelhead, and bull trout. Pacific lamprey (state-sensitive species) may be present in the Columbia River, which is adjacent to the project area. The project was reviewed and consulted on under the HIP Biological Opinions under Section 7 of the ESA. The project sponsor would adhere to all applicable site-specific conservation measures identified in the HIP consultation and approval, including turbidity monitoring requirements and in-water work timing. Additionally, CREST would coordinate with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) to obtain fish salvage and isolation permits to isolate the work area and exclude fish and amphibians from the project footprint. There would be long-term benefits to restoring the project area to a more natural condition and restoring habitat for local fish.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Most of the proposed work would take place within waters and wetlands, with the exception of staging and fill placement, but these areas would be restored following construction. CREST would obtain all required permits prior to project implementation. Wetland quality would improve due to the restoration of natural flow patterns and the replacement of invasive species with native plants.

Notes:

- Obtain Regional General Permit #6 and Removal-Fill Permit prior to project construction.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be some miniscule potential for contamination of groundwater from fuel or fluid drips or spills from the equipment used for construction, but spills and drips with the volume necessary to contaminate groundwater are unlikely.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The project would not change the capability of the land to be used as it was prior to project actions. There would be no land use changes, and no impact to specially-designated areas. The railroad is not currently in use, so there would be no disruption of rail service as a result of the project.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Some changes in vegetation and the associated visual quality would occur in the immediate project area, but the restoration project would return the area to a more natural state and would be consistent with the visual quality of the surrounding area. The channel spanning bridge would look slightly different than the previous culverts, but it would be visually consistent and not represent a major change to the visual quality of the area. There would be long-term improvement in the visual quality of the area due to the restoration of a more native plant and animal habitat condition.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Any increase in emissions from vehicles accessing the project site would be very minor and short term.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be some noise impacts from the heavy equipment used for construction, but this would be very minor and short term.

12. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: All applicable safety regulations would be followed during work activities.

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: This project is sponsored by CREST on land owned by Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) and the North Coast Land Conservancy (NCLC). Both are project partners and advocates of the proposed project.

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

Signed:

Shawn Skinner
Environmental Protection Specialist