

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy



Proposed Action: Nimz Ranch Connector Channels Project

Project No.: 2002-011-00 and 2002-002-00

Project Manager: Elizabeth Santana, EWM-4

Location: Boundary County, ID

Categorical Exclusion Applied (from 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 Kootenai Tribe of Idaho (Kootenai Tribe) to conduct habitat restoration activities for the Nimz Ranch Connector Channels Project. The project would improve the ecological productivity of the floodplain, improve the hydrologic connection between river and floodplain by increasing the frequency and duration of surface water connection, increase the area of seasonally inundated off-channel aquatic habitat, increase plant community diversity, and decrease the area of monotypic reed canarygrass (*Phalaris arundinacea*) (RCG) communities. Funding supports BPA's commitments to the Kootenai Tribe in the Memorandum of Agreement between Kootenai Tribe and BPA, while also fulfilling commitments under the 2020 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Columbia River System Biological Opinion (2020 USFWS CRS BiOp). These actions also support ongoing efforts to mitigate for effects of the Federal Columbia River Power System on fish and wildlife in the main stem 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.).

The proposed action includes: (1) excavating channels to restore floodplain connectivity between the Kootenai River and its historical floodplain; (2) addressing riparian and aquatic habitat degradation; (3) improving riparian function and nutrient exchange; (4) enhancing aquatic and semi-aquatic habitat; and (5) increasing habitat diversity. Construction would take place between August and December, with in-water shoreline work restricted to a low-flow window between August and early November. Project phasing would include establishing site access and staging areas, mobilizing equipment, acquiring and delivering materials, implementing work area isolation and environmental controls, excavating and regrading 13.3 acres of connector channels, placing 86,000 cubic yards of RCG sod and excavated soils to expand the point bar by 6.6 acres, installing containerized plantings and browse protectors, installing fencing, seeding and reclaiming disturbed areas, and demobilizing equipment and materials. After grading, floodplain roughness would be enhanced with the placement of native woody material, including 10 medium logs, 50 small logs, and 150 brush pieces per acre. Revegetation would include the planting of 2,125 native containerized trees and shrubs, protected from wildlife herbivory by 54 small enclosure fences and individual browse protectors. Additionally, native ground cover would be restored by broadcasting a native riparian seed mix across 21.2 acres of wetland treatment areas and a native upland seed mix across 17.8 acres of disturbed soil and access routes.

Construction equipment such as large excavators, scrapers, motor graders, bulldozers, and dump trucks would be used for earthwork and grading associated with excavation and regrading of channels and deposition of material at the point bar. Excavated sod and soils would be transported directly to the point bar for installation, with no long-term stockpiling of materials. Construction access for the proposed action would use US-2/US-95 and Turner Hill Road. Existing unpaved roads on site would be graded and treated for dust control (water application) as needed during construction. Temporary access roads would be developed, with crush gravel placed within channel crossings for stabilization. Silt fences would be installed between the haul roads and adjacent wetlands as needed and temporary construction fencing would be installed along access routes through existing wetlands to minimize disturbance. Stormwater would be managed using existing drainage patterns with runoff routed into natural depressions in the existing topography in the work area. Turbidity curtains would be installed around work occurring below the ordinary high-water mark at the point bar to minimize impacts to water quality. Turbidity monitoring would occur during any work below the ordinary high-water mark or when there are discharges into slower water. Heavy equipment would operate solely from the dry top of bank or the adjacent shoreline margin and would not track directly onto the active channel bed.

Findings: In accordance with Section 1021.102 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; 90 FR 29676, July 3, 2025, Interim Final Rule) and the current *DOE National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Implementing Procedures*, BPA has determined the following:

- 1) The proposed action fits within a class of actions listed in Appendix B of 10 CFR 1021;
- 2) The proposal has not been segmented to meet the definition of a categorical exclusion; and
- 3) There are no extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action that may affect the significance of the environmental effects of the proposal (see attached Environmental Evaluation).

Based on these determinations, BPA finds that the proposed action is categorically excluded from further NEPA review.

Daphne Day
Environmental Protection Specialist

Concur:

Sarah T. Biegel
NEPA Compliance Officer

Attachment(s): Environmental Evaluation

Categorical Exclusion Environmental Evaluation

This evaluation 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: Nimz Ranch Connector Channels Project

Project Site Description

The proposed project area is located approximately 14 miles northwest of the city of Bonners Ferry, Idaho between river mile (RM) 136.5 and 139 of the Kootenai River. The project site is located within a 676-acre former ranch property that has been in Tribal trust since 2016; BPA holds a conservation easement on the site. The site is set on the historical Kootenai River floodplain and contains a variety of relic high flow channels and over 264 acres of delineated wetlands. Topography in the project area is relatively flat, and vegetation communities include wetland, upland shrub, mixed conifer forest, and grassland meadow. Previous restoration work on the site includes breach excavations through higher ground adjacent to riverbanks as well as development and/or improvement of connector channels through the interior.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No with Conditions

Explanation: BPA initiated consultation with the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho and Idaho State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) on November 24, 2025 (BPA Project # ID 2026 001; F&W Project #2002-011-00; Contract 84055; Idaho SHPO #2026-64). On December 4, 2025, SHPO concurred with the delineated Area of Potential Effects, efforts to identify historic properties, and finding of no historic properties affected. No additional responses were received.

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: Restoration activities would disturb soils on the project site. Best Management Practices (BMPs) have been developed to avoid or minimize temporary fine sediment impacts, increased turbidity downstream, and erosion during construction. All ground disturbance would be stabilized and monitored throughout the length of implementation. All disturbed areas would be stabilized after construction by planting, seeding, and mulching.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No ESA or state-listed plant species have been recorded in or near the project area. Non-listed plants in the project area would be impacted by project activities such as construction grading and fill placement. BMPs would be employed to avoid damage to plants whenever possible. All areas disturbed by construction activity would be replanted or seeded with native species to stabilize topsoil, prevent introduction of invasive species, and

improve habitat quality. Attempted suppression of invasive RCG would be completed through partial excavation to allow native species to be planted; the excavated sod would then be fully submerged below the inundation elevation and buried to effectively drown out the RCG. Overall, this project would have a positive impact on vegetation conditions in the long term.

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

Potential for Significance: No with Conditions

Explanation: Local wildlife present within the area could be disturbed by project activities. There are 25 state-listed avian species with documented presence at the site. These species include several migratory and wintering waterfowl (blue-winged teal, cinnamon teal, gadwall, northern pintail, lesser scaup, bufflehead, Barrow's goldeneye, and common merganser), along with other aquatic waterbirds such as the common loon, pied-billed grebe, double-crested cormorant, California gull, and Bonaparte's gull. There are also many documented migrating shorebirds, including the lesser yellowlegs, greater yellowlegs, Wilson's phalarope, red-necked phalarope, spotted sandpiper, and black-necked stilt, as well as five other species: American kestrel, peregrine falcon, barn swallow, least flycatcher, grasshopper sparrow, and American pipit. Disturbance from the proposed actions would be temporary, and the surrounding landscape provides ample habitat and cover for displaced individuals. No habitats would be modified to any degree that might permanently displace resident wildlife, though some may be temporarily displaced by disturbance from equipment noise and human presence. Wildlife would likely reoccupy the site following completion of the proposed activities. The proposed project is expected to improve aquatic and riparian habitat, which would have a beneficial effect for wildlife species in the long term.

In accordance with the Endangered Species Act (ESA), BPA obtained an official species list from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). The list of threatened or endangered species includes grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos horribilis*), Canada lynx (*Lynx canadensis*), and wolverine (*Gulo gulo luscus*). Audiovisual disturbance to any nearby grizzly bear would be temporary in temporal and geographic scope and would not appreciably affect the ability of the species to forage, breed, or shelter in the larger landscape. Thus, the project "may affect, not likely to adversely affect" grizzly bear. Due to the Project occurring at low elevations in the floodplain, high-elevation species such as Canada lynx and wolverine are unlikely to occur, and thus the project would have no effect. Two proposed species, monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*) and Suckley's cuckoo bumble bee (*Bombus suckleyi*), have not been documented in the vicinity but also have the potential to occur and may be affected by proposed actions through removal of individuals or insect host plants; however, the project is unlikely to jeopardize the continued existence of the species and over the long term, the project would have a beneficial effect. USFWS concurred with BPA's determination on June 12, 2026.

Notes:

- The project would follow all conservation and mitigation measures outlined in the biological assessment.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Proposed actions would alter portions of the waterway and would temporarily disrupt aquatic habitat and species. A total of 2,650 linear feet of sod would be placed within the Kootenai River to expand the point bar. Direct effects to Kootenai sturgeon include potential temporary displacement of a few juveniles during in-water work due to noise, chemical contamination, and turbidity stressors. Introduced plant species may indirectly affect sturgeon by reducing habitat and forage material for prey species. After construction is complete, there is some potential for entrainment of individual juvenile Kootenai sturgeon in interior wetlands in years when inundation occurs. Over the long-term, the proposed Project is expected to beneficially affect Kootenai sturgeon. No Kootenai sturgeon have

been observed at Nimz Ranch during past seasons of inundation under current conditions; based on these findings, stranding/trapping (take) of juvenile Kootenai sturgeon is expected to be extremely low. Direct effects to bull trout and other non-listed fish include temporary displacement from increased turbidity or chemical contamination during in-water work. After project completion, bull trout are not expected to be entrained in the newly created off-channel habitat. Juvenile bull trout are not known to use off-channel wetlands for rearing, and adult and sub-adult use deep pools in the mainstem Kootenai River during foraging and migration. BMPs are expected to prevent exceedances of water quality standards or degradation to water quality. Over the long-term, the project would be expected to beneficially affect fish species. Therefore, the project “may affect” but is “not likely to adversely affect” Bull Trout and “may affect” and is “likely to adversely affect” Kootenai River white sturgeon. USFWS concurred with BPA’s determination on June 12, 2026.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No with Conditions

Explanation: Implementation of the proposed restoration would result in temporary, localized physical disturbances to existing wetland resources, followed by long-term ecological and hydrological recovery and benefit. There would be a total of 25 acres of temporary and permanent impacts within the site’s wetlands, which would include approximately 13 acres of channel grading, 6.5 acres of sod and native soil placement, and 5 acres of temporary construction access. Overall, a total of an estimated 3.5 acres of new wetland creation would be achieved. Potential temporary erosion and water quality concerns would be greatly reduced through construction BMPs. The project would be covered for Clean Water Act compliance under a Nationwide Permit 27.

Notes:

- No physical construction, mobilization, or ground-disturbing work would occur until all Clean Water Act permits are issued.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Increasing floodplain reconnection would promote increased local groundwater recharge. There would be no impact to any municipal water sources.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No with Conditions

Explanation: There are no specially-designated areas. The site is zoned for agriculture by the county; no public access is currently allowed. The restoration activities would be in line with the purposes outlined in the BPA conservation easement that exists on the property. No change in land use would occur. The Kootenai River is used for recreational boating and fishing, but overall recreation in this specific stretch of river is low as the closest boat ramps are over ten miles away. If present, recreationists could experience disruptions such as noise disturbance or boating hazards during construction, but the likelihood would be low due to BMPs. In the long term, the project would benefit recreationists through enhanced ecological health of the river.

Notes:

- No physical construction, mobilization, or ground-disturbing work would occur until any required local/state permits and/or land use approvals are issued.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed work would result in temporary and permanent changes to the landscape. During implementation, visual changes would occur from material staging, excavation equipment, vegetation disturbances, and human presence. The effects of these changes would be minor and short term. Overall, following construction, the project area would return to its natural condition, and long-term visual effects would be minor.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be minor increases in local air pollution during project activities due to exhaust from machinery and equipment. BMPs would be used to limit the amount of dust created by equipment. Conditions would be expected to return to normal immediately after the project is completed. There would be no long-term effects to air quality.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be minor increases in noise generated by machinery and equipment used during daylight hours only. The noise would be minor and short-term and there would be no long-term changes in noise levels.

12. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: During project implementation, all personnel would follow BMPs to ensure human health and safety; solely licensed and trained professionals would operate all machinery. There would be no soil contamination or hazardous conditions and no CERCLA sites within the project area.

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 work would occur on property owned by the Kootenai Tribe.

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

Signed:

Daphne Day
Environmental Protection Specialist