

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy



Proposed Action: John Day MSFCA Juniper Removal Phase 2

Project No.: 2007-397-00

Project Manager: Chad Baumler, EWL-4

Location: Grant County, Oregon

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 Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon (CTWS) to remove western juniper (*Juniperus occidentalis*) from approximately 105 acres of land in Grant County, Oregon. The land is part of the CTWS-owned John Day Mainstem Forrest Conservation Area (MSFCA). The proposed project represents Phase 2 of juniper removal activities on the MSFCA property, with the Phase 1 juniper removal previously occurring within an adjacent 90-acre area to the north of Phase 2.

With the suppression of fire across the landscape, western juniper encroachment into sagebrush steppe, grassland, and riparian plant communities has disrupted the native plant communities and hydrologic cycle in these environments. Juniper dominance alters the ability of the soil to capture, store, and release water, as juniper can consume (uptake and transpire) substantially more water than native bunchgrasses and other vegetation, leaving less water in the soil. Active juniper management can improve soil moisture retention and groundwater recharge, leading to increased cool-water summer base flow to streams that benefits Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed fish and other aquatic life.

The proposed project would remove (thin) approximately 70 percent of the juniper trees from the project area, leaving 30 percent of the trees in place. Equipment used to remove trees would include a tracked feller-buncher equipped with a bar saw for tree cutting and piling. Stumps would be left in place. A medium-sized excavator would be used for plucking and piling small juniper (less than 4 inches diameter). A tracked skid steer may also be used for piling cut trees. The piled trees would be left in place at the completion of this project. CTWS may eventually burn the piles as part of ongoing juniper maintenance operations at CTWS properties. Cut juniper is typically seasoned one to three years before burning. BPA is not currently proposing to fund burning of the piles as part of this action.

The proposed action would support conservation of ESA-listed species considered in the 2020 ESA consultations with both the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on the operation and maintenance of the Columbia River System. These activities also support ongoing efforts to mitigate for the 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 1021.102 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.

John Vlastelicia
Environmental Protection Specialist

Concur:

Katey C. Grange
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: John Day MSFCA Juniper Removal Phase 2

Project Site Description

The proposed juniper removal project area encompasses approximately 105 acres of the northern part of CTWS's 3,445-acre John Day MSFCA property, which is located just east of Prairie City in Grant County, Oregon. CTWS manages a conservation grazing program on the property, which also offers the McHaley Pond picnic area for visitors as well as hiking and hunting opportunities, deer and elk, by permit. The John Day River flows in a westerly direction through the southern part of the property. U.S. Highway 26 also transects the southern part of the property, and the valley bottom between the river and highway is irrigated and used for cattle grazing. The terrain slopes upward north of the highway, and the northern portions of the property contain hilly grasslands and areas of trees of varying densities, with considerable western juniper coverage in the project area. A gravel road provides vehicle and equipment access to the project area from Highway 26, which is about one mile south of where Phase 2 tree removal would occur.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No with Conditions

Explanation: BPA initiated consultation with CTWS, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR), Burns-Paiute Tribe, and Oregon State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) for the project on October 12, 2021, as part of a Section 106 National Historic Preservation Act consultation process (BPA CR Project No. OR 2022 005). SHPO acknowledged receipt of the consultation package on November 30, 2021 (SHPO Case No. 21-1503). On November 8, 2022, BPA determined that the undertaking would result in no historic properties affected and submitted a supporting cultural resources inventory report to the consulting parties with the determination letter. CTUIR responded to the determination letter on November 23, 2022, to state that they had no concerns or comments on the project. The 30-day comment period closed on December 8, 2022, with no other comments received from consulting parties.

Notes:

- Previously recorded resources identified in the cultural resources inventory report would be avoided by all project activities. These resources are located within an area of low juniper density where no juniper removal or other ground disturbing work is proposed.
- Protocols would be in place requiring that, if cultural material is inadvertently encountered during the implementation of the project, work would be halted in the vicinity of the finds until they can be inspected and assessed by BPA in coordination with the appropriate consulting parties.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be temporary soil disturbance from juniper felling, hauling, and piling of cut trees. The stumps of cut trees would not be removed, and no other excavation is proposed. Tracked equipment would be used to minimize soil disturbance and compaction (compared to tires). An existing gravel road from U.S. Highway 26 would be used for vehicle and equipment access to the juniper removal area.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Nuisance western juniper trees are the only vegetated targeted for removal by this project. Some incidental disturbance to other vegetation – primarily groundcover species – is expected because of equipment operation and cutting, hauling, and piling juniper trees. The site is not within the range of any federal ESA-listed plant species, and there are no documented occurrences of state-listed plants in the proposed project disturbance areas.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Wildlife including deer, elk, coyote, various small mammals, and birds may use the project area. Juniper removal activity could temporarily deter wildlife from using the project area, due to ground disturbance, visual disturbance, and noise from equipment operation and human activity. Additionally, juniper trees provide habitat structure for birds and small mammals; that type of habitat structure would be reduced with the trees removed. CTWS estimates that approximately 70 percent of the juniper trees in the project area would be removed with this project, with the rest remaining available for wildlife use. Impacts to nesting birds would be avoided by performing the tree removal outside of the April 15th – July 31st primary nesting season.

The North American wolverine is the only federal ESA-listed (Threatened) wildlife species with a geographic range that overlaps the project area. The wolverine is also an Oregon state-listed Threatened species. There have been very few verified wolverine sightings in Oregon and none in the project area, with the closest known wolverine activity being in the Wallowa Mountains of northeastern Oregon. The project area is at an elevation of under 4,300 feet and does not provide the alpine forest conditions and deep, persistent spring snowpack that is typical suitable habitat for wolverine denning. The project area is not within mapped wolverine maternal or primary habitat, and their limited numbers in Oregon and lack of previous activity in the project area make it extremely unlikely they would be encountered during the proposed juniper removal. The project would therefore have no effect on North American wolverine.

There are no documented occurrences of other state-listed Threatened or Endangered species in the project area.

Notes:

- Perform tree removal outside of the April 15th – July 31st primary nesting season.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There are no mapped streams or floodplains within the proposed juniper removal area. The terrain in the project area slopes down toward the east and south, draining to Slaughterhouse Gulch on the MSFCA property outside of the tree removal area. Slaughterhouse Gulch flows into the John Day River about two miles downstream (and southwest) of the project. The John Day River is designated critical habitat for ESA-listed Middle Columbia River (MCR) steelhead trout and bull trout, and it is also used by Chinook salmon and redband trout. StreamNet identifies Slaughterhouse Gulch as habitat for redband trout, but it is not identified for use by, and is not designated critical habitat for, ESA-listed MCR steelhead trout or bull trout, and it is not suitable Chinook salmon habitat.

The proposed project would not involve in-water work or removal of riparian vegetation, and it would not otherwise cause changes in water quality, hydrology, or stream habitat conditions that would adversely affect ESA-listed fish or non-listed fish. By removing juniper trees that consume a substantial amount of water, the project is expected to improve groundwater recharge and may contribute to improvements in summer streamflow.

conditions. Such actions may benefit ESA-listed and non-listed fish in waters downstream of the project, especially in conjunction with other juniper removal activities in the upper John Day basin and in conjunction with planned instream habitat improvement activities on the John Day River at the MSFCA property.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: National Wetland Inventory mapping identifies no wetlands within the proposed juniper removal area. The project does not involve excavation or fill placement, and no wetland impacts are expected.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed juniper removal would not involve groundwater withdrawals or discharges to groundwater. Juniper trees uptake and transpire a considerable amount of water from the soil; more than the native bunchgrasses that would take their place. Reducing the number of juniper trees is expected to increase the amount of water available for groundwater recharge in the project area. The project site is not within a Groundwater Restricted Area designated by the Oregon Water Resources Department or a Sole Source Aquifer designated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The juniper removal would occur on land owned and managed by CTWS as part of the John Day MSFCA. The juniper removal activity may temporarily restrict public access to the 105-acre project area during the approximately four to eight weeks that the juniper removal is expected to occur. This represents a small portion of the overall (3,445-acre) MSFCA property. The project would not change long-term use of the land and is not within any specially designated area that would prohibit the activity.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed project would alter visual conditions of the site by reducing tree coverage while leaving approximately 30 percent of the juniper trees in place. The tree removal area currently has a relatively high density of juniper trees compared to surrounding lands, which generally include large expanses of grass with areas of lower-density trees and shrubs. The project involves no new structures, would not interfere with public views, and would not otherwise adversely affect the natural visual character of the area.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed juniper removal would not introduce new sources of air emissions or otherwise affect air quality in the long term. Minor temporary increases in exhaust emissions from gasoline and/or diesel-powered equipment and vehicles would occur during juniper removal. Dust emissions would be relatively minor based on the limited soil disturbance, with plans to cut trees and leave the stumps in place. The project is not located in an area designated by the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality as a Non-Attainment or Maintenance Area with current or historic issues meeting ambient air quality standards.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The project would not introduce new permanent sources of noise to the area. Temporary increases in noise would be expected during the juniper removal work, which would involve operation of equipment that may include a tracked feller-buncher, saw, excavator, and skid steer. The work would be performed during daylight hours and would not be performed near noise-sensitive receptors such as residences, schools, or hospitals.

12. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed juniper removal would present no long-term risks to human health and safety. Temporary worker safety hazards typical of tree removal would be expected from the operation of equipment used to cut and pile the juniper trees.

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: CTWS owns the property on which the juniper removal would occur. No additional landowner coordination is needed.

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

Signed:

John Vlastelicia
Environmental Protection Specialist