

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy



Proposed Action: Asotin Creek Wildlife Mitigation Project Operations and Maintenance (O&M)
(Update to Previous CX issued May 20, 2020)

Project No.: 2006-005-00

Project Manager: Tracy Hauser, EWL-4

Location: Asotin and Garfield County, Washington

Categorical Exclusion Applied (from Subpart D, 10 C.F.R. Part 1021): B 1.20 Protection of Cultural Resources, Fish and Wildlife Habitat

Description of the Proposed Action: The Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) is proposing to continue annual funding the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) for Operations and Maintenance (O&M) of the Asotin Creek Wildlife Area. The goal of these activities proposed actions are to “protect, manage, and restore” habitat values for wildlife. This is an update to the CX issued on May 20, 2020 to reflect the purpose of the mitigation funding.

Asotin Creek Wildlife Area is divided into two units located in Asotin and Garfield Counties. The lower unit is the George Creek property at approximately 12,000 acres and Bickford property, which is comprised of 5,600 acres. The upper unit is named the Smoothing Iron Ridge unit and is approximately 20,000 acres located on the North and South Forks on Asotin Creek.

The primary objectives are to reduce noxious weed populations on the upper and lower units, rehabilitate riparian zones and provide a wildlife food source. O&M activities would continue improving existing areas. No new construction or renovations are scheduled. Observational routine maintenance would lead to repair of fence only if damaged. Plumbing routine maintenance would ensure that water systems do not have leaks, plug ups from rodents are cleared, and pumps are operating at full capacity. Plumbing maintenance is critical O&M for fire protection and wildlife watering stations. Observational quality control of buildings would occur to ensure no damage from the natural elements or the public that would result in health and human safety issues on the grounds (i.e. graffiti, break-ins, property damage). Routine equipment inspection/maintenance would occur inside buildings and adjacent driveways to ensure all equipment in stored buildings is operational and functional for the summer/fall high visitor field season. Maintenance of vegetation around buildings and public sites for fire break protection would occur through weed spraying and mowing tall grass.

As defined above the property has 2 units of land that were traditionally used for livestock production and dry land farming. The land has several problems associated mainly with noxious weeds and degraded riparian management zones. Vegetation Management O&M would include the following activities:

- Annual observation of weeds on all units are addressed through ATV mounted sprayers, and/or pickup mounted sprayers to control noxious weeds such as Scotch Thistle, Yellow Starthistle, Mediterranean Sage, Sulfur Cinquefoil, Houndstongue, Dalmation Toadflax, Rush Skeletonweed, and Leafy Spurge.
- Plowing and seeding would occur on the Smoothing Iron Ridge Unit. By using a tractor and plow, approximately 50 acres would be seeded with winter wheat, oats and canola to be used as a food source and attraction for big game species - mainly elk. The field has been plowed annually for the last 40 years with a tractor and plow.
- Mowing and herbicide applications would occur on the Smoothing Iron Ridge Unit. Approximately 400 acres of the Unit was seeded to a native forb/grass mix in the spring of 2013 and is experiencing challenges with noxious weeds. The main control method would be mechanical mowing using tractor pulled 15' mower. Intense or isolated patches of heavy weed growth would be controlled by herbicide spot spraying with ATV mounted sprayers.
- Monitoring for Spalding's Catchfly, which is a federally-listed plant, began in 2009 and took place in 2010 by graduate students from Washington State University (WSU). 2020 efforts would be funded by BPA and would continue each year after. US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) approved survey protocols that would be used. There would be no physical plant samples removed and/or collected with observational data collection employed to inform vegetation management of the property.

No new gates, fencing, signs, water systems or structures would be installed as part of this project and no renovations to buildings, barns or houses.

Funding the proposed activities would support Bonneville's ongoing efforts to mitigate for effects of the 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. 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.

/s/ Catherine Clark

Catherine Clark

Contract 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.

Proposed Action: Asotin Creek Wildlife Mitigation Project Operations and Maintenance (O&M)
(Update to May 20th 2020 Categorical Exclusion)

Project Site Description

Activities would occur on WDFW-owned property within the Asotin Creek Wildlife Area, an approximately 38,0000 acre property made up of uplands and riparian areas comprised of steep canyons with timbered North facing slopes and predominately South facing slopes with shrub/steppe habitat type interspersed with retired farmland parcels and active agriculture lands. The Tucannon, Snake, Grande Ronde, and Walla Walla rivers, plus Asotin Creek and the many tributaries of these stream systems support fish, wildlife, and recreational opportunities in portions of the wildlife areas.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: On May 15, 2020, BPA conducted a cultural resources file search utilizing information provided from the Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation (DAHP) WISAARD system for the Asotin Creek Wildlife Management Project O&M (2006-005-00/Contract 74314) located in Asotin County, WA (T9N R44E Sec 31). According to their records, there have been no previously recorded sites within the vicinity of the project area. Two previous archaeological inventory efforts have been conducted in the vicinity – one for BPA-funded wildlife and livestock water developments (Cannell 2007, NADB 1349553), and one for BPA-funded O&M actions related to terrace removal and guzzler installation (Yorck 2014; NADB 1685589).

As a result, the BPA archeologist determined that as long as proposed project activities are limited to using a tractor and plow to seed an existing field, in a manner that is consistent with recent and historic use of the area, and where ground disturbance is limited to the existing plow zone, that the project would have no potential to cause effects to historic properties.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Ground-disturbing activities would be limited to the winter wheat seeding, for which soils would not migrate beyond the existing agricultural field. No other ground-disturbing activities are proposed and, thus, the other proposed activities 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: Limited ground disturbance would occur that would disturb vegetation. Monitoring for Spalding's Catchfly, which is an Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed plant, would occur. There would be no physical plant samples removed and/or collected with observational data collection employed to inform vegetation management. USFWS approved survey protocols that would be used.

Proposed vegetation management would use herbicides and adjuvants based on BPA's Habitat Improvement Program (HIP) Biological Opinion to remove weeds. The ongoing annual actions are similar to vegetation management activities already occurring in the surrounding area. In the long term, the vegetation management O&M activities would result in an improvement in the vegetative condition of the wildlife area.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Minor temporary disturbance to wildlife. Equipment use would be stopped during nesting and breeding season in locations where nesting birds may be present to minimize effects. All actions would be deferred until later in the season. All work performed would avoid eagle nesting areas, which typically are in extremely rugged areas and located on rocky cliffs; these areas are avoided all together by project actions. There would be no impact to ESA-listed or state sensitive species.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed activities would not involve any in water work or impact to water bodies, floodplain or fish.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: None present in the proposed action areas.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be no groundwater withdrawal. Herbicides would be applied in compliance with BPA's HIP Biological Opinion with limited or no potential to reach groundwater if applied according to label instructions (as is required).

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be no changes to land use and no impact to specially designated areas. WDFW owns the land where the proposed projects would take place. Opportunities for public recreational use would continue to be available for the property. Sign in kiosks are posted at all property access points and online with information including hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, hiking, walking photography, camping, horseback riding along with property regulations.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: O&M construction/repairs would be limited to buildings and fence infrastructure. Construction repairs would improve appearances of existing structures and infrastructure from enhancements to buildings, fences, and vegetation management. This would be consistent with the long-term ongoing land use operations through use of light trucks and ATVs on the property and surrounding properties.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be short-term effects of vehicle and equipment generating dust for short durations and would not be inconsistent with the long-term ongoing land use operations on the property and surrounding properties.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be short-term effects of vehicle and heavy equipment (i.e. tractor/mower) generating noise and consistent with the long-term ongoing land use operations in the area defined in the management plan and would not be inconsistent with surrounding land uses of agricultural and forest working lands.

12. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Wildlife Area staff attend herbicide/pesticide recertification workshops to keep their Washington State Public Operator spraying licenses up to date according to Washington State Law. Human health and safety would follow federal guidelines. Appropriate PPE would be worn by all employees across all tasks. Human health and safety conditions would be maintained and or improved by the structural and or infrastructural improvements proposed.

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, the underlying land manager, would be conducting the proposed work.

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

Signed: /s/ Catherine Clark October 5, 2023
Catherine Clark, ECF-4 Date
Environmental Protection Specialist