

## Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration

Department of Energy



**Proposed Action:** Rainwater Wildlife Areas Operations and Maintenance

**Fish and Wildlife Project No.:** 2000-026-00

**Project Manager:** Andre L'Heureux EWU-4

**Location:** Columbia County, WA

**Categorical Exclusion Applied (from Subpart D, 10 C.F.R. Part 1021):**

B1.20 Protection of Cultural Resources, Fish and Wildlife Habitat; B1.30 Routine Maintenance; B 1.11 Fencing; B 1.15 Support Buildings

### **Description of the Proposed Action:**

Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) proposes to fund the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) to conduct operation and maintenance (O&M) activities on the Rainwater Wildlife Area pursuant to the Columbia Basin Fish and Wildlife Program, and the *Washington Wildlife Mitigation Agreement among members of the Washington Wildlife Coalition of Resource Agencies and Tribes and the Bonneville Power Administration* to help the BPA meet Columbia River Basin mitigation obligations and objectives.

Specific Actions for ongoing operations and management include:

- **Fence Maintenance:** Annual maintenance of 6.5 miles of wildlife area boundary fence to protect habitat and reduce damage caused by trespass livestock on Robinette Mountain. Fences typically consist of four-strand barbed wire with metal posts and wooden structural elements (h-braces and rock jacks). Work would include foot and/or vehicle travel along fence alignment to visually inspect fence for damage from trees, wildlife, and/or livestock; splicing wire, replacing wooden stays or "t" posts, repairing anchor structures, tightening wire, cutting and removing downed trees, etc., as necessary to maintain fence in functional condition.
- **Forest Management:** During the late fall, winter or early spring (prior to the nesting season), up to 300 acres of forest would be thinned annually to reduce stand density from approximately 300 trees/acre to 50-75 trees per acre. Tree thinning would involve trees approximately less than 12 inches in diameter to encourage mature forest overstory growth. The thinning would promote healthy stands of timbered habitat. Understory debris pile burning would occur on up to 150 acres per year.
- **Weed management:** A long term integrated pest management program would integrate the following control techniques: biological (introducing bio-agents that control weeds), chemical (applying herbicides), cultural (burning or grazing) and mechanical (physically removing weeds). The specific combination used would be tailored to the weed species, site, topography, and management goals. Treatments would address a multitude of invasive species including, but not limited to, yellow starthistle, spotted

knapweed, and Canada thistle and to promote habitat recovery to native bunchgrass grasslands.

During the spring and summer seasons, herbicide applications would occur to control weeds on approximately 300 acres of primarily grassland along roads and ridgetops accessible by ATV. Ground-based treatments would be conducted with backpack sprayers and ATV-mounted spray booms/nozzles using herbicides approved in BPA's Habitat Improvement Program (HIP) biological opinion with US Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service.

Late-season targeted goat grazing would be used to control yellow starthistle on 2,500 acres of the South Fork Touchet River watershed. Grazing begins when starthistle are flowering, typically in late July or August on steep rangeland.

- **Road Trail Maintenance:** Annually in the summer, up to 3 miles of road maintenance would occur on the South Touchet, South Fork Road, Wildlife Area Access Roads, Robinette Mountain roads and public parking areas. This would include repairing fords, cut and fill failures, and stream crossings. Pit run rock would be spread on the existing road prisms (as needed) and parking areas to stabilize and maintain vehicle access to private inholdings along with seasonal use by the general public. In addition, a nature/bird trail would be maintained in conjunction with local private landowners to increase non-consumptive public use of the wildlife area. No disturbance would extend in width or depth beyond the original road or trail prism footprint. Base rock material is readily available from several existing, local sources.
- **General Maintenance:** The inspection, maintenance and replacement of faded signs and reader boards would occur, as necessary, across all access points to inform and educate the public. Ongoing maintenance would occur to uphold the structural integrity and aesthetic of the Rainwater office/residence/field station. This would include installation of pressure treated wood and decking materials, roof and windows to be repaired on an as needed basis.

Any ground disturbance areas would be reseeded after disturbance and no ground disturbance would occur in wetlands or waterbodies. Work would largely be conducted by workers traveling on foot or via existing access roads on the wildlife area. Work would be accomplished with hand tools and equipment with the exception of the road and trail maintenance, which may require excavators and dump trucks, depending on the level of repair.

**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/ Dan Gambetta  
Dan Gambetta  
Environmental Protection Specialist

/s/ Chad Hamel  
Chad Hamel  
Supervisory Environmental Protection Specialist

Concur:

/s/ Katey Grange  
Katey Grange  
NEPA Compliance Officer

Date: May 4, 2020

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:** Rainwater Wildlife Areas Operations and Maintenance

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### Project Site Description

The Rainwater Wildlife area consists of 11,000-acres comprising a substantial portion of the upper South Fork Touchet River drainage in the Walla Walla River subbasin, adjacent to the Umatilla National Forest. The Wildlife Area has steep topography including approximately 8,300 acres of upland and riparian coniferous forest, 2,500 acres of native and native-like grasslands, and 200 acres of deciduous riparian habitat. Approximately 127 miles of streams have been mapped within the boundary of the wildlife area which range in size from small ephemeral draws to larger fish bearing streams such as the South Fork Touchet River. Existing conditions within Wildlife Area streams include limited quantity and quality of pool habitat, poor riparian conditions, high summer stream temperatures, and excessive stream bank erosion. Predominant fish species include resident rainbow trout, lamprey, dace, reidsided shiner, and sculpin. The Wildlife Area provides 10 miles of headwater spawning and rearing habitat for ESA-listed summer steelhead, bull trout, and resident trout.

Extensive habitat surveys were conducted in forest, riparian, and grass and shrubland cover types in 1998 and 1999 to assess habitat conditions. Forestland consists primarily of grand fir and Douglas-fir dominated timber stands with ponderosa pine occurring on south and southwest slopes. In their native states, grassland communities include Idaho fescue, bluebunch wheatgrass, and Sandberg's bluegrass. Primary shrub lands include snowberry, wild rose, mallow ninebark, and ocean spray. Riparian plant communities include black cottonwood, sitka alder, willow, dogwood, and coniferous species.

The Walla Walla Subbasin is inhabited by 10 amphibian species, 207 avian species, 69 mammalian species, and 15 reptile species. While the Rainwater Wildlife Area historically provided suitable habitat for a wide variety of these flora and fauna, the Wildlife area has been heavily impacted by previous management practices such as logging, road construction, channelization, and livestock grazing.

### Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

Environmental Resource Impacts	No Potential for Significance	No Potential for Significance, with Conditions
1. <b>Historic and Cultural Resources</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Explanation: There have been five separate occasions in which BPA consulted under Section 106 of NHPA in the Rainwater Wildlife Area. The consultations were for the potential ground disturbance related road repair in 2006 (no CR# available), boundary fence construction in 2009 (no CR# available), tree thinning and boundary fence construction in 2011 (Log No.: 041311-01-BPA), nature trail and fence construction in 2014 (Log No.: 090814-13-BPA), and further tree thinning and associated log haul out roads in 2017 (BPA CR No# WA 2017 066). CTUIR and the Washington Department of Archaeology & Historic Preservation were consulting parties, with the CTUIR conducting surveys and reports. In each of the five consultations, BPA made a final determination of no historic properties affected. All ongoing actions, tree thinning, plantings, fence and road repairs would take place within the previously surveyed APEs and would be maintained to previous conditions. No new ground disturbance is proposed. The Rainwater office/residence/field station is a modern modular home that is less than 50 years old and therefore not considered a historic property.

2. <b>Geology and Soils</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Explanation: Minimal soil disturbance would occur as tree removal would involve selective thinning, cut at the base rather than pushed over. Impacts are expected to be short term as slash cleanup, erosion control and other rehabilitation efforts would prevent soils from becoming mobilized. All disturbed areas from grazing or herbicide treatment would become seeded with a custom native seed mix to facilitate vegetation recovery. Ground disturbance associated with maintaining roads, trails, fences would be minimal to nonexistent while planting and reseeding efforts will stabilize soils in the long-term.

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



Explanation: There would be short term adverse effects to small trees, weeds, and shrubs due to slash pile burning and tree thinning. However these activities would promote and support establishment of an old growth forest regime. All disturbed sites would be replanted with a native seed mix and slash pile burning would enrich the soil promoting further growth.

Weed management strategies would vary depending on numerous factors including weed species and associated vegetation, initial density of infestations and topography. Herbicide applications would take place primarily on upland grassland areas on slopes less than 20% and use HIP conservation measures that will minimize the potential for drift or runoff to non-target vegetation. There would be little or no treatments in riparian areas.

Grazing impacts on native plants would be negligible and largely limited to some trampling because grazing would occur by goats who would prefer to eat noxious weeds over more desirable plants and would be used typically in late July or August after native forbs have seeded by this time.

After all treatments the ground would be seeded with native grass seed to restore native Palouse grasslands. Desirable native vegetation would have adequate time to recover between grazing and herbicide application periods, to improve competition with noxious species. This would reduce the overall impact on native vegetation while suppressing noxious weeds. Over the long term, therefore, the effects to vegetation from such actions would be the restoration of native plant communities.

The only potential Federally Endangered Species Act (ESA) listed special status plant species in the Blue Mountains of SE Washington is the Ute ladies'-tresses. It is a rare perennial, terrestrial orchid that occupies riparian edges, gravel bars, old oxbows, and high flow channels, and moist wet meadows along perennial streams. None of the activities are proposed in these areas and they have never been documented or seen in the Rainwater Wildlife Area, possibly as a result of historic over grazing. Therefore, operation and maintenance of the wildlife area would have no effect on Ute ladies'-tresses.

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



Explanation: The proposed activities associated with road repair and traffic use can create disturbance that can affect wildlife. These include noise, smoke, traffic, smells, etc. While these actions don't modify habitats, they can temporarily disrupt wildlife behavior and displace their use of habitats. Some actions (e.g. brush pile burning or herbicide application) may affect the structure and condition of habitats while not eliminating the habitat altogether.

The wildlife area provides habitat for big game such as elk, deer, black bear, cougar, blue and ruffed grouse, wild turkey and California quail. Noise, smoke and hauling activities associated with tree thinning and road repair would incur short term behavioral avoidance to any wildlife within a quarter of a mile. All activities are intended to improve habitat for these forest dwelling creatures, with a long term beneficial effect by eventually restoring mature diverse forest.

All actions would be implemented primarily after mid to late summer outside the nesting season for migratory birds. Shrubby riparian areas (key migratory bird nesting areas) would not be impacted in the spring (key migratory nesting period) as it would be too wet to operate machinery. Handwork associated with fencing may occur during that time however the impact to migratory birds would be negligible, and likely from unintentional disturbance rather than destruction of nest sites.

In the spring, before tree thinning activities take place, neomigratory bird surveys would occur. The project sponsor would conduct thinning outside of the nesting season or, if conducting the activity during spring nesting season, the sponsor would conduct nesting bird surveys prior to clearing. In the past no nesting eagles or raptors have been detected in the wildlife area, likely due to the forest itself being extensively logged and currently lacking old growth overstory which provides the ideal quality habitat for species of concern such as raptors, hawks and eagles.

The following ESA-listed terrestrial species are known to occur in the Blue Mountains of SE Washington, Gray Wolf (*Canis lupus*) and Canada lynx (*Lynx canadensis*). While suitable habitat may exist for these ESA-listed species in the Rainwater Wildlife Area, no records show the presence of lynx with a negligible likelihood for presence in the future and the actions would have no effect on this species. Gray Wolf have been detected passing through the area however, there are no permanent denning sites and will not be affected by noise, smoke and hauling activities associated with tree thinning and road repair. The project would be conducted in accordance with BPA's programmatic Habitat Improvement Program (HIP) Biological Opinion for any potential effects to Gray Wolf.

Note:

- If spring tree thinning is needed, identify active bird nests and avoid nest if identified in tree thinning areas.

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



Explanation: A majority of all activities would occur in the upland areas and away from riparian areas and surface waters. Herbicide applications would occur mainly in the upland areas and utilize HIP conservation measures to minimize drift and runoff exposure. Road repairs would entail spot applications of pit-run base rock to harden the road surface and decrease rutting, improve road drainage, and decrease sediment delivery to the South Fork River. Ongoing fence repair would prevent livestock from trespassing into the Wildlife Area and reduce the risk of sediment transport and delivery to stream channels.

6. **Wetlands**



Explanation: Although Rainwater Wildlife Area has wetlands, all road, fence, and building maintenance would occur within the existing footprint and would not impact any wetlands. All activities associated with tree thinning would avoid wetlands. HIP conservation measures would preclude the application of herbicides near any wetlands by requiring an adequate buffer. Road-related actions associated with spot rocking road segments would occur outside of the riparian area, and would be completed during dry conditions.

7. **Groundwater and Aquifers**

Explanation: There would be no ground disturbance hence no effect to groundwater and aquifers.

8. **Land Use and Specially Designated Areas**

Explanation: The Rainwater Wildlife Area supports heavy recreational use during spring and fall hunting seasons, beginning with turkey season in early May and general archery season for deer and elk in late August/early September. In addition, the public engages in antler and mushroom collecting as well as camping. Recreationists using and traveling through the Rainwater Wildlife Area would experience short-term (2-4 weeks seasonally) delays from adjacent forest management activities. Due to the limited size, frequency and duration of these activities, long-term effects to developed recreation would be negligible.

Notes:

- Proposed activities would be timed to not interfere with public use such as spring turkey and bear hunting and antler collection (April-June), fishing (July-August) and big game hunting seasons (elk, deer, cougar, bear, grouse) (August-December).

9. **Visual Quality**

Explanation: Maintenance activities include upkeep of public parking areas and information boards (kiosks), litter pickup, and maintenance of 1.6 miles public/private nature trail. Long-term benefits from these projects would result in improved viewing throughout the valley for both recreationists and residents. CTUIR staff promptly identify, retrieve, and dispose of all debris left at the wildlife area in order to maintain a clean and visually aesthetic environment.

10. **Air Quality**

Explanation: Vehicle traffic on primitive roads would temporarily produce dust, but there would be no long-term substantial changes to air quality as road surfaces would be maintained to address dust and sedimentation issues.

11. **Noise**

Explanation: Noise from light maintenance (e.g., road brushing and grading) and use of heavily-used roads, log hauling on heavily-used roads, chainsaws for felling trees, heavy equipment for road improvements, and road repairs, would not be detectable above ambient levels greater than 0.25 miles. These impacts would occur during daylight hours during the summer months on a seasonal basis. The type of noises would be within the typical sounds generated by a ranching community and not rise to a level of significance due to the limited frequency of these sounds.

12. **Human Health and Safety**

Explanation: No long-term public safety problems are anticipated with this project. Short-term safety hazards would exist such as truck traffic and equipment needed. These activities would be mitigated through an area closure and contract safety provisions and would not impact public safety. No hazardous materials (lead and asbestos) would be mobilized or disturbed from repairs to the Rainwater office/residence/field station.

**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, if necessary:

- Require siting and construction or major expansion of waste storage, disposal, recovery, or treatment facilities (including incinerators) that are not otherwise categorically excluded.

Explanation, if necessary:

- 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, if necessary:

- 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, if necessary:

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#### **Landowner Notification, Involvement, or Coordination**

The wildlife area is managed under the Rainwater Wildlife Area Watershed Management Plan developed by the CTUIR, who conducted public open house public meetings on the draft plan. Annual project proposals are submitted to and reviewed by the 15-member Rainwater Advisory Committee and done in accordance with the site's management plan.

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

Signed: /s/ Dan Gambetta  
Dan Gambetta ECF-4  
Environmental Protection Specialist

Date: May 4, 2020