

# Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration  
Department of Energy



**Proposed Action:** Hellsgate Big Game Winter Range Aerial Seeding

**Project No.:** 1992-048-00

**Project Manager:** Kyle Goeke Dee, EWM-4

**Location:** Okanogan County, Washington

**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 Colville Confederated Tribes (CCT) to perform aerial seeding operations to restore native grasses and shrubs on approximately 1,300 acres of wildlife area located on the Colville Indian Reservation in north-central Washington. Funding for the activity would serve as partial mitigation for the loss of fish and wildlife habitat due to the construction of the Grand Coulee and Chief Joseph Dams on the Columbia River system, under provisions of the Pacific Northwest Electric Power Planning and Conservation Act of 1980 (Northwest Power Act) (16 U.S.C. 839 et seq.).

During the summer of 2021, portions of the Agency Butte and Berg Ranch wildlife mitigation areas (WMAs) were burned by wildfires, consuming substantial amounts of the shrub and grass cover on the units. The vegetation on the WMAs provides important forage for local wildlife, including mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*) and pronghorn antelope (*Antilocapra americana*). CCT would seed the affected portions of the WMAs with native grass and shrub seed by helicopter. Seeding would be completed with the use of a broadcast seeder attached to a helicopter and flown systematically over the seeding area at low altitude and speed. Seeding would be limited to upland areas and take approximately 3 to 4 days for each WMA, dependent on weather conditions. All species of shrub and grass to be seeded are native to the region and include antelope bitterbrush (*Purshia tridentate*), Indian ricegrass (*Oryzopsis hymenoides*), blue bunch wheatgrass (*Pseudoroegneria spicata*), sandberg bluegrass (*Poa secunda*), sand dropseed (*Sporobolus cryptandrus*), and needle-and-thread grass (*Hesperostipa comata*).

All seeding flights would be completed by the end of March, 2022. The areas seeded would be monitored throughout the following year to determine if future remediation efforts are needed to further restore the areas.

Two staging areas for landing and refueling the helicopter and storing supplies of seed and fuel would also be established. Both staging areas would be approximately 1 acre in size and established on previously disturbed land during winter in order to limit ground disturbance from operations.

**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/ Thomas DeLorenzo

Thomas DeLorenzo

Environmental Protection Specialist

Concur:

/s/ Katey C. Grange                      March 7, 2022

Katey C. Grange

Date

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:** Hellsgate Big Game Winter Range Aerial Seeding

### **Project Site Description**

The Hellsgate Big Game Winter Range occupies nearly 62,000 acres on the Colville Indian Reservation in Ferry and Okanogan counties in north-central Washington. The area contains a large range of different habitats ranging from coniferous forests, riparian corridors, shrub-steppe grasslands, and agricultural areas. Much of the area upon which the proposed activities take place is typical shrub-steppe ecology, with native bunchgrasses and shrub vegetation dominating upland areas and narrow riparian zones along the banks of the Columbia River and its tributaries. The area has been heavily impacted by historic cattle and horse grazing associated with past ranching activities.

The proposed activities would take place on two of the WMAs in the Hellsgate Range – the Agency Butte WMA and Berg Ranch WMA. Both WMAs are located in Okanogan County, Washington. Agency Butte is located roughly 12 miles north of the Grand Coulee Dam. The proposed seeding area at Agency Butte covers an area of approximately 720 acres of mostly upland hills. Berg Ranch is located roughly 16 miles northwest of the Grand Coulee Dam and is situated on the north bank of the Columbia River. The proposed seeding area at Berg Ranch covers roughly 550 acres ranging from just outside of the riparian zones on the banks of the Columbia River into nearby upland hills. The proposed seeding areas on both WMAs consist of steep sided drainages and former agricultural fields that had been previously reseeded with native vegetation. All activities would occur in upland areas.

The staging area for the Agency Butte WMA would be located at the entrance of an existing gravel pit to the northeast of the proposed seeding area. The staging area for the Berg Ranch WMA would be located west of the proposed seeding area on a fallow agricultural field. Both staging areas would be roughly 1-acre in size and solely on previously disturbed ground.

### **Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources**

#### **1. Historic and Cultural Resources**

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: BPA identified an area of potential effect (APE) and conducted background research into recorded cultural resources and archeological surveys near the APE (BPA CR Project No. WA 2022 30). BPA determined that the activities would have no effect on historic properties. BPA initiated consultation with the Colville Confederated Tribes on February 1, 2022. The consultation period ended March 3, 2022. No response was received.

Notes:

- In the event of inadvertent discovery of cultural resources during project activities, all work would cease, the area would be secured, and BPA archeological staff and the CCT Tribal Historic Preservation Office would be notified.

## 2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: All seeding would be done by aircraft and involve no ground disturbance. Staging areas would be on an existing agricultural plot and a gravel pit and would not disturb soil any more than typical action at those locations. Rotor wash from the helicopter may cause light disturbance of the top most layer of soil during operations, but the effects would be minor and similar to the natural effects of a moderate wind.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed plant species are present in the proposed seeding areas (US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Information for Planning and Consultation (IPaC) Consultation Code 01EWF00-2020-SLI-1470). Additionally, no Washington state-listed plant species are present in the proposed seeding areas (Washington State Department of Natural Resources 2021 Plant Species of Conservation Concern List). All seeding would be done by aircraft and involve no direct contact with existent local vegetation. Staging areas would be on an existing agricultural plot and a gravel pit and would not disturb vegetation more than typical action at those locations. Rotor wash from the helicopter may cause disturbance to vegetation, but the effects would be temporary and similar to the natural effects of a moderate wind. Additionally, seeding native vegetation that was destroyed by wildfire would have long-term positive impacts by promoting natural ecosystem regrowth.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Potential habitat for ESA-listed Canada Lynx (*Lynx canadensis*) and Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*) is present on both WMAs (USFWS IPaC Consultation Code 01EWF00-2020-SLI-1470). However, no actual presence of either species has been recorded within Hellsgate (email correspondence; Kelly Singer; CCT Principle Wildlife Biologist; November 16, 2021) and the project would have no effect on ESA-listed species. Potential habitat for Washington state-listed Columbian Sharp-Tailed Grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus columbianus*) occurs throughout the proposed seeding area (Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife). Noise and rotor wash from the helicopter would disturb wildlife on the WMAs during operations. However, the disturbance would be temporary and there would be no long-term negative impacts to wildlife. Additionally, seeding native forage vegetation that was destroyed by wildfire would have long-term positive impacts on local wildlife. Restoring vegetation would have particularly positive effects on resident Sharp-Tailed Grouse, as they rely on the shrub-grass cover that was destroyed by wildfire for nesting.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No activities would occur in water bodies. The proposed seeding locations are all in upland areas.

## **6. Wetlands**

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There are no wetlands mapped on the USFWS National Wetlands Inventory in the proposed seeding locations. No activities would occur in wetlands.

## **7. Groundwater and Aquifers**

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No new wells or use of groundwater are proposed. The proposed activities would not affect groundwater.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Existing land use would not change as a result of these activities.

## **9. Visual Quality**

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be no adverse effects to the visual quality of the environment as a result of these activities. Reseeding natural grasses and shrubs that were destroyed as a result of wildfire would have the long-term effect of restoring the traditional visual quality of the area.

## **10. Air Quality**

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Minor, temporary generation of exhaust associated with the operation of the helicopter would occur during the proposed activities. This exhaust would cause no long term changes to local air quality.

## **11. Noise**

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Noise increases would be caused by the helicopter during the proposed activities. The noise is expected to be temporary, localized, and would not cause any significant long-term impacts.

## **12. Human Health and Safety**

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: All personnel would use best management practices to protect worker health and safety.

### **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: All WMAs that would be seeded are owned and maintained by the CCT. No external coordination would be needed to implement the proposed activities.

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

Signed: /s/ Thomas DeLorenzo March 7, 2022  
Thomas DeLorenzo – ECF-4 Date  
Environmental Protection Specialist