

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy



Proposed Action: Sunnyside Wildlife Area Operations and Maintenance 2023-2024

Project No.: 2002-014-00

Project Manager: Ryan Ruggiero, EWM-4

Location: Benton and Yakima Counties, Washington

Categorical Exclusion Applied (from Subpart D, 10 C.F.R. Part 1021): B1.3 Routine maintenance; B1.20 Protection of cultural resources, fish and wildlife habitat

Description of the Proposed Action: The Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) proposes to fund the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) to perform ongoing routine operations and maintenance (O&M) activities on wildlife areas comprising nearly 11,000 acres in central Washington collectively referred to as the Sunnyside Wildlife Area. Funding the proposed actions would support conservation of Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed species considered in the 2020 ESA consultations with both the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) on the operations and maintenance of the Columbia River System, while also supporting 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 (the Northwest Power Act) (16 USC 839 et seq.).

Project activities would take place across five separate mitigation units – the Headquarters (Sunnyside) unit, the I-82 Ponds unit, the Byron unit, the Thornton unit, and the Rattlesnake Slope unit. No BPA funds would be used for projects on other units of the wildlife area. The proposed activities would include:

Maintain Vegetation

WDFW staff would maintain desirable vegetation and remove noxious and invasive species to improve wildlife habitat across the mitigation units. Staff would control weeds and invasive species using a variety of mechanical methods (mowing, weed whacking), physical methods (hand pulling, chopping), chemical methods (herbicide), and biological methods (drought stress) as appropriate. Controlled burns conducted with the local fire department would not use BPA funds. WDFW would mow larger growths of undesirable plants as well as roads, parking lots, and fire breaks to limit vegetation growth. In areas where mowing would be impractical, other methods of controlling weeds would be used. In wet cells, WDFW staff would strategically dewater areas to control the growth of weeds.

WDFW staff would also seed and plant desirable native vegetation to improve habitat and to provide forage for migratory and resident wildlife. Areas that are treated for weeds would be re-planted with native vegetation following treatment. Additionally, forage vegetation seed would be

spread for wildlife use. Large numbers of migratory waterfowl, such as Canada geese (*Branta canadensis*), overwinter at Sunnyside. WDFW would also plant existing agricultural fields on the units with millet and small grains to provide forage for these birds during the winter. Pollinator seed mix would also be spread in areas to provide habitat and forage for pollinator species, such as migrating monarch butterflies (*Danaus plexippus*).

Maintain Buildings and Equipment

Buildings and grounds on the units would be maintained to protect the health and safety of staff and public visitors and maintain a professional appearance of the mitigation areas. Buildings, including the main office building, storage sheds, and machine shop, would be kept in good order. Maintenance would include general upkeep, removing debris and trash, painting and cleaning, and other similar activities. No new construction is proposed. Equipment used for project activities, such as tractors and trucks, would also be maintained and repaired as needed.

Maintain Roads, Parking Lots, and Fire Breaks

Existing roads, parking lots, and fire breaks throughout the mitigation units would be maintained. Many of the access roads and parking lots are packed dirt and gravel, and require regular maintenance to repair potholes, washouts, and other damage caused by regular wear-and-tear and the elements. WDFW staff would fill potholes with replacement gravel cobble and regrade the roads as necessary to create a smoother road prism. No work would occur outside the existing prism and no new road construction is proposed. Additionally, since many of these roads serve as fire breaks, staff would ensure that vegetation growth in and around the roads is controlled to maintain the efficacy of the fire breaks.

Existing parking lots and pull-outs would be similarly maintained.

Associated infrastructure, such as access gates, signs, and trash cans, would also be maintained. Damage caused by normal wear-and-tear, the elements, and vandalism would be repaired and infrastructure replaced with like-for-like replacements as needed.

Maintain Fences

Cattle trespass from neighboring landowners has been a consistent problem at Sunnyside. To help deter grazing by cattle on wildlife area units, WDFW constructed border exclusion fencing in areas with the highest incidence of trespass. WDFW staff would routinely check these segments of existing fencing to find any damage caused by normal wear-and-tear, the elements, and vandalism. Damage would be repaired and fencing segments would be replaced with like-for-like replacements as needed. No new fencing construction is proposed.

Remove Debris

Garbage and litter would be cleared from the units. Illegal dumping is a persistent problem on some of the Sunnyside mitigation areas, particularly along the interstate highway. Both routine and incidental checks of parking areas, roads, and trails would be conducted to find and remove garbage dumped by visitors on the sites. Small garbage and litter would be collected by hand and disposed of in a dumpster on the Headquarters unit. Larger items like old appliances and tires would be collected by truck and stored at the Headquarters unit until taken to a local landfill or recycling center for disposal. Abandoned vehicles would be referred to the local sheriff's office for identification and disposal. No historic structures or items would be removed.

Maintain Wetlands

WDFW maintains wet cells and wetlands on the Byron and Headquarters units. The water levels in these wet cells are controlled with existing dirt levees and water control structures. Staff would maintain this infrastructure as needed. This would include cleaning debris in the water control structures, repairing damage caused by normal wear-and-tear, and reinforcing the levees to maintain the proper height. No new construction is proposed.

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:

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: Sunnyside Wildlife Area O&M 2023-2024

Project Site Description

The Sunnyside Wildlife Area consists of more than a dozen separate units comprising roughly 21,400 total acres located in Franklin, Benton and Yakima counties in south-central Washington owned and maintained by WDFW. Sunnyside has 19 designated visitor parking lots and roughly 25 miles of roadways maintained by WDFW, as well as dozens of miles of hiking, hunting, and sporting trails for visitor use throughout. Sunnyside also has a number of wildlife preserves and habitat areas inaccessible by visitors to provide secluded habitat for resident and migratory wildlife, especially wintering migratory waterfowl.

BPA funding would be provided for actions that would take place on five of Sunnyside's units, which total roughly 10,700 acres of the wildlife area.

Headquarters Unit

The Headquarters unit (alternatively referred to as the Sunnyside unit) is located in the Yakima River floodplain along the northern shore of the river in eastern Yakima County. The unit is between 630 and 680 feet above sea level and located approximately 6 miles west of Grandview, Washington. The unit shares 13 miles of shoreline with the Yakima River and consists of diverse habitats ranging from native grassland and scrubland to mature riparian woodlands along the shore. Small agricultural fields provide forage for migratory wildlife, especially wintering waterfowl like Canada geese, throughout the unit. The unit's ecology is varied but typical of upland regions of the Columbia Plateau.

Byron Unit

The Byron unit is located in the Yakima River floodplain along the southern shore of the River in eastern Yakima County. The unit is between 650 and 725 feet above sea level and located 5 miles south of Grandview, Washington. The unit is dominated by a wetland system that runs the full 2 mile length of the unit and is closed to public access most of the year. The unit is a popular nesting area for migratory and resident waterfowl. Outside of the wetland areas, the unit is largely shrub-steppe and grassland, predominantly vegetated by bluebunch wheatgrass (*Pseudoroegneria spicata*), Sandberg bluegrass (*Poa secunda sandbergii*), and rabbitbrush (*Ericameria nauseosa*).

I-82 Ponds Unit

The I-82 Ponds unit consists of 17 separate parcels totaling roughly 1160 total acres in the Yakima River floodplain sandwiched between the shores of the River and Interstate 82 in eastern Yakima County. The unit is between 750 and 1000 feet above sea level and located approximately 8 miles southeast of Yakima, Washington. The unit consists of narrow bands of mature riparian forest along the banks of the river transitioning to shrublands and grasslands outside of the riparian zone. Several ponds formed from flooded borrow pits left over from construction of the nearby interstate highway form additional habitat for resident and migratory wildlife.

Thornton Unit

The Thornton unit is located in western Benton County roughly 8 miles north-northeast of Prosser, Washington. The unit is between 1470 and 2450 feet above sea level and sits along the southeastern edge of the Rattlesnake Hills. The habitat largely consists of shrub-steppe grassland and upland prairie. A narrow band of riparian habitat grows along Snipes Creek, which bisects the unit. Several north to south canyons cross the unit and provide habitat to native wildlife like the greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) and North American elk (*Cervus elaphus*).

Rattlesnake Slope Unit

The Rattlesnake Slope unit is located in western Benton County roughly 5 miles north of Benton City, Washington in the southeastern edge of the Rattlesnake Hills. The unit consists of nearly 3600 acres with elevations ranging from 450 to 2100 feet above sea level. The unit shares a small shoreline with the Yakima River on the eastern edge but is mostly upland shrub-steppe grassland and shrubland. Bunchgrasses and native wildflowers are common on the unit, and efforts to restore the native shrub-steppe habitat that was severely impacted by wildfire in 2018 are ongoing.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: A BPA archaeologist reviewed the proposed actions and conducted background research into known cultural resource sites in the project areas (BPA CR No. WA 2022 130). The archaeologist determined that the proposed actions would have no effect on historic and cultural resources.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Some of the proposed activities would cause minor soil disturbance of the top layer of soil, but the effects would be minimal. Road and parking lot maintenance would be confined to existing road prisms. Replacement and repair of the boundary fences would require some light excavation if new posts are needed, but all digging would be in previously disturbed areas. Planting shrubs and forbs would also require digging small holes. The effects on soils from these activities would be minor and localized.

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 project areas (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Information for Planning and Consultation (IPaC) tool). Project activities would therefore have no effect on ESA-listed plants.

Washington state-listed endangered Wormskiold's northern wormwood (*Artemisia campestris* var. *wormskioldii*), littleleaf rockcress (*Boechera cascadensis*), Kellogg's dwarf rush (*Juncus kelloggii*), and yellow wildrye (*Elymus flavescens*) may be present in Benton and/or Yakima Counties (Washington Department of Natural Resources, 2021 Plant Species of Conservation Concern List). Proposed project activities would not occur in areas with identified populations of state-listed species. WDFW staff monitor the WMAs for the presence of species of concern and would flag any populations for avoidance. Project actions would therefore have no effect on these species.

There would be mild impacts to non-listed vegetation from some of the proposed activities. Vegetation maintenance would necessitate removing vegetation, but this removal would be targeted at noxious, undesirable, and non-native species. Areas that are treated would be re-seeded and planted with desirable native vegetation, improving the habitat in those areas. Maintaining roads, parking lots, and fire breaks would also require mowing and removing some vegetation. These activities would be consistent with ongoing practices in those areas and limited to existing disturbed areas. No other activities would have any appreciable effects on vegetation.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: ESA-listed gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) may be present on the Sunnyside WMAs. Wolves typically avoid human presence and would be unlikely to be present during project activities. Any wolves in the area would leave during project actions to avoid WDFW staff. Project activities would be consistent with past O&M on the wildlife units. As a result, project actions would have no effect on wolves.

Nesting populations of Washington state-listed endangered ferruginous hawk (*Buteo regalis*) have been observed in Benton and Yakima counties. Ferruginous hawk is a migratory bird that nests in upland shrub-steppe habitats in southern and central Washington between April and September before migrating to overwinter in warmer areas to the south. WDFW staff monitor the wildlife units for any hawk nests and ensure that they are not disturbed by project activities. Additionally, Washington state-listed endangered greater sage-grouse has been observed on the Thornton unit. Staff routinely monitor the unit for grouse and ensure that project activities do not impact habitat for the grouse, in addition to flagging areas with grouse activity to dissuade public disturbance. Project actions would therefore have no effect on these species.

There would be mild negative impacts to non-listed wildlife from some of the proposed project activities. Wildlife would potentially be disturbed by human presence and noise. These effects would be temporary and consistent with typical O&M activities that have been carried out in these areas. There would be no long-term negative effects on wildlife, and long-term effects of maintaining and enhancing the wildlife areas would have long-term positive impacts on local and migratory wildlife in the area.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: ESA-listed bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) and bull trout critical habitat, Chinook salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*), coho salmon (*Oncorhynchus kisutch*), and steelhead salmon (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) are present in the Yakima River, which flows along many of the Sunnyside wildlife units (IPaC, StreamNet Mapper). No proposed activities would take place in the river and negatively impact any present fish. Project actions would support the conservation of these fish species by maintaining desirable riparian vegetation along the river and educating the public about the species and efforts to restore and enhance their habitat. Vegetation maintenance along the river would be limited to mechanical and manual removal and would not require application of herbicides to any water bodies. Maintenance of trails and associated infrastructure that run along the riverbanks would not require any actions in the water body. No other proposed activities would have any appreciable effects on fish and waterbodies.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There are mapped wetlands present on the Headquarters, I-82, and Byron units (USFWS National Wetlands Inventory). Some of these wetlands are man-made and maintained for habitat improvement purposes by WDFW. Maintaining the levees and water control structures would be consistent with past activities in these wetlands and be conducted to maintain and improve the condition of these wetlands. No proposed activities would result in removal, fill, or destruction of wetlands. Removal of invasive and undesirable vegetation in wetlands would open more space for native species and improve the quality of local wetlands.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No new wells or use of groundwater is proposed in this project. The proposed actions would not affect the local water table.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Units at Sunnyside are currently maintained for a variety of purposes, including wildlife habitat and public recreation. No changes to these uses are proposed. Some project activities, such as road and parking lot maintenance, would require closing access to the public temporarily to work in affected areas. These closures would be temporary, consistent with past maintenance activities in the area, improve ease of access and public safety, and cause no long-term changes to public access and traffic patterns.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Any changes to visual quality because of the proposed activities, such as planting vegetation, would be minor.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Vehicles and equipment used for some proposed project activities, such as trucks and lawnmowers, would produce some exhaust. This exhaust generation would be temporary, limited in scope, consistent with past O&M activities at project areas, and cause no lasting impacts to the local air quality.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Vehicles and equipment used for some proposed project activities, such as trucks and lawnmowers, would produce noise. This noise would be temporary, limited in scope, consistent with past O&M activities at project areas, and cause no lasting increase to local noise levels.

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 the Sunnyside WMAs are owned by WDFW. Management would be conducted in accordance with the wildlife area's management plan, which was developed in coordination with the Wildlife Area Advisory Committee and the public. No further external coordination is required.

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 September 14, 2023
Thomas DeLorenzo Date
Environmental Protection Specialist