

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy



Proposed Action: McNary-Ross No. 1 Line Mile 146 Distressed Tower Mitigation

PP&A No.: 4,282

Project Manager: Tina Edwards – TEPL-TPP-1

Location: Skamania County, Washington

Categorical Exclusion Applied (from Subpart D, 10 C.F.R. Part 1021): B 1.3 Routine Maintenance

Description of the Proposed Action: To comply with Western Electricity Coordinating Council (WECC) standards, other regulations, and to ensure the integrity of the Northwest's electrical grid, Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) proposes to remediate ongoing structural damage occurring to a section of the McNary – Ross No. 1 high voltage transmission line that is located in an active landslide area in Skamania County, WA. Steel lattice transmission towers 146/2 and 146/1 show significant structural distress as a result of the downward creep of the landslide. Replacement of distressed sections of the structures has been unsuccessful as the landslide is still active. To remedy this issue, two new transmission line towers would be installed outside of the active landslide area. New steel lattice tower construction would involve excavation for the new footer locations (approx. 10 ft. x 10 ft. footprint per footing), installation of the footers, and building out the steel lattice. Installation of new hardware and insulators on the back of line (BOL) or east side of 146/4 would also need to occur. Existing towers 146/1, 146/2, and 146/3 would be cut 6" below grade and removed. New conductor, hardware, and assemblies would be installed from 145/7 to 146/4, and new insulators and assemblies would be installed from 145/2 to 147/2. To access structure 146/1, a new approximately 500 ft. section of gravel road would be constructed to safely mobilize heavy equipment. No other road work or landing construction would be required. A gravel pit northeast of structure 145/7 would be used for a material yard. Three additional material yards could be utilized to accomplish the work, as necessary. Construction is proposed for the summer and fall of 2023.

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/ Zoe Wellschlager

Zoe Wellschlager

Physical Scientist (Environmental)

Concur:

/s/ Sarah T. Biegel

Sarah T. Biegel Date: May 22, 2023

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.

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Project Site Description

The proposed project is located in southern Washington on private property about four miles north of Beacon Rock and adjacent to US Forest Service (USFS) land, in the Cascades Level III ecoregion. The Cascades ecoregion is dominated by the topography of the Cascade Mountain Range, with western hemlock and Douglas-fir forests in a low elevation alpine environment. The underbrush contains sword fern, lady fern, Oregon grape, grasses, and small shrubs.

The project area is located on private land owned by the ORM Timber Fund, just north of the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area boundary and USFS land within the Gifford Pinchot National Forest. The ROW easement through the project area measures approximately 300 feet in width and crosses approximately 2 miles of terrain. Land use surrounding the right-of-way (ROW) corridor in the proposed project area is recreational and private timber.

The proposed action would occur within, nearby, and immediately adjacent to, BPA right-of-way and access roads for the 345 kV high voltage McNary-Ross No. 1 transmission lines from structure 145/2 to 147/2 in Skamania County, WA. Three additional material yards would be located just north of the ROW and the main material yard would be located in a gravel pit that lies partially in the ROW and private property. BPA does not own the property on which the transmission lines are located, but rather has easement rights to operate and maintain the transmission lines. Vegetation within the ROW is periodically managed to remove tall-growing trees and promote low-growing grasses and shrubs.

BPA manages a network of access roads across its service territory to provide access to its transmission lines and towers. A large portion of these roads are contained within the ROW and follow the transmission lines. Sometimes these roads leave the ROW due to topography or other physical barriers. These roads are accessed where they intersect with public, private, or Forest Service roads or trails.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: BPA engaged in consultation with the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation, the Cowlitz Indian Tribe, the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, and the Washington Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation (WDAHP) on August 18, 2022.

On January 9, 2023, BPA sent a determination letter stating that the undertaking would have no adverse effects to historic properties. WDAHPP responded in concurrence on January 10, 2023. No other consulted parties responded during the 30-day comment period.

In the unlikely event that cultural material is inadvertently encountered during the implementation of the project, BPA would require that the work be halted in the vicinity of the finds until they can be inspected and assessed by the appropriate consulting parties.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The project requires several ground-disturbing activities including excavation for two new footers (approx. 10 ft. x 10 ft. footprint per footing), and installation of approximately 500 ft. of gravel road. For the towers being removed, the ground disturbance would be minimized by leaving the remaining structure and foundation 6" below ground in situ. Erosion and sediment control best management practices would be implemented. Disturbed soils would be stabilized and re-seeded with a native seed mix.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Local plants would be heavily disturbed in the locations being excavated for new footings and in the location being converted to a gravel road. Plants may also be disturbed if they are driven over while installing conductor, hardware, and insulators if the plants are growing in or near the ROW where vehicles would need to be stationed. However, local plant species are predominantly commonly occurring species, and disturbed soils would be seeded and monitored for revegetation.

BPA obtained a species list on April 5, 2023, for the project area from the US Dept. of Fish and Wildlife (USFWS). No plant species protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) are listed in the project area. Therefore, the project would have "No Effect" on ESA-listed plants.

According to state databases, there are two special-status plants present within half a mile of the general project area. Mt Hood bugbane (*Actaea laciniata*) is ranked as imperiled in Washington, and Cascade grass-of-Parnassus (*Parnassia cirrata* var. *intermedia*) is listed as endangered in Washington. Both of these species prefer moist soil conditions. Since no wetlands are recorded in the project area and moist ground would be avoided by vehicles, the project would not impact state-listed species.

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

Potential for Significance: No with Conditions

Explanation: Wildlife that could be present in the project area, such as small mammals and birds, could be temporarily disturbed or displaced by project activities. However, disturbance would be temporary, and the surrounding lands provide ample habitat and cover.

In accordance with the Endangered Species Act (ESA), BPA obtained a species list for the project site from the US Fish and Wildlife (USFWS) on April 5, 2023.

Threatened northern spotted owls could be in or near the project area, as the project is adjacent to modeled suitable habitat as well as designated critical habitat. BPA prepared a Biological Assessment (BA) that addresses potential effects of the project to northern spotted owls. Since work would take place outside of the critical breeding period of northern spotted owls (March 1st – July 15th), any disturbance due to noise or presence of people and equipment is determined to cause an insignificant effect on spotted owls that could be present. BPA determined that the proposed action *may affect*, [but is] *not likely to adversely affect* northern spotted owl. The project would have *no effect* on northern spotted owl critical habitat as no designated critical habitat is present in the project area. Due to the lack of suitable habitat and recorded observations in the Action Area, BPA has determined that the project would have *no effect* on yellow-billed cuckoo, bull trout, North American wolverine, gray wolf, and monarch butterfly. BPA submitted the BA on April 14, 2023, to the USFWS. On May 11, 2023, the USFWS responded in concurrence with the determination that the proposed project *may affect*, [but is] *not likely to adversely affect* northern spotted owl.

According to state databases, the Cascade torrent salamander (*Rhyacotriton cascadae*) could be present near the project area. This species is identified as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) under the State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP). This species is also identified as a Priority Species under WDFW's Priority Habitat and Species Program. Since this species is generally associated with water sources, and work would not be taking place in or near water sources, this project would have no impacts on torrent salamander.

Notes:

- To comply with the ESA and minimize potential impacts to northern spotted owls, all project work must occur during the late nesting season, post July 15th.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No in-water work or ground disturbance near waterways is proposed. No waterways are present within the project area. The project would have “No Effect” on ESA-listed fish.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No wetlands are present in or near the project area.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There are no aquifers in the project areas. The project would require excavation 11'-13' deep to place footers for the new tower locations. Spill prevention measures would be utilized during construction activities to avoid creating a pathway for groundwater contamination.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed action would not alter existing land use, and is not located in a specially-designated area.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The removal of three towers and the addition of two new towers, along with the construction of 500' of new road, would alter the visual character of the project area to a certain extent. However, the overall existing visual profile of a high-voltage transmission corridor would not be impacted and vegetation disturbance would be minimized to the extent possible.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Short-term impacts to air quality could occur from dust generated by construction activities and vehicle emissions. Road contractors would be required to manage dust generation, and impacts from increased vehicle use would be temporary and limited.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Short-term increases in ambient noise would occur due to construction activity. However, increased noise generation would be temporary. Apart from the transmission line corridor and roadway, the project area is isolated.

12. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The project is designed to lower risks to human health and safety by replacing several unsafe transmission line structures that are located in an active landslide area. All construction activity would follow established industry standard safety protocols, including a Safety Plan, job hazard briefings, and employing flaggers as necessary.

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: BPA has reached out to all stakeholders in the project area, including underlying landowners and the ORM Timber Fund. BPA would continue to coordinate construction activity as necessary during project implementation and finalization.

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

Signed: /s/ Zoe Wellschlager

Zoe Wellschlager
Physical Scientist (Environmental)

Date: May 22, 2023