

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy



Proposed Action: McNary-Ross No. 1 Mile 132 Access Road Realignment and Brush Creek Timber Placement Project

PP&A No.: 4,401

Project Manager: Donna Martin, TELF-TPP-3

Location: Skamania, WA

Categorical Exclusion Applied (from Subpart D, 10 C.F.R. Part 1021): B1.3 Routine Maintenance; B4.6 Additions and Modifications to Transmission Facilities

Description of the Proposed Action: Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) proposes to widen the turning radius of the access road near line mile 132 of the McNary-Ross No. 1 transmission line. BPA owns and operates the 345-kV McNary-Ross No. 1 high voltage transmission line, and maintains a series of roads that provide access to the transmission right-of-way (ROW) for planned repairs, inspections, and emergency response. The proposed project would involve excavating into a hillside adjacent to the road and widening the existing road footprint approximately 150 linear feet. Approximately 1700 cubic yards of material would be excavated. The excess material would be spread within the BPA ROW in an upland location and revegetated, or hauled and disposed. Approximately 20 trees would need to be removed, ranging from two 26-inch-diameter Douglas firs, to several 8-inch-diameter firs. Disturbed soils would be stabilized and revegetated with a native seed mix and monitored to ensure successful revegetation.

In addition to the road widening, BPA is also proposing to install the large timber removed during the road work in Brush Creek, a tributary to the Wind River, which flows near the project area. The timber would be installed within the channel of Brush Creek, against the eastern bank, in an effort to reduce erosion near a BPA access road and to enhance stream ecology. The location where the timber would be installed is dry during late summer months. Timber would be secured to the channel with duck-bill anchors and cable. Work equipment would likely include a large excavator, a grader, dump truck, light duty trucks, and other heavy machinery.

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/ Aaron Siemers
Aaron Siemers
Environmental Protection Specialist

Concur:

/s/ Katey Grange
Katey Grange
NEPA Compliance Office

Date: *April 9, 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: McNary-Ross No. 1 Mile 132 Access Road Realignment and Brush Creek Timber Placement Project

Project Site Description

The project area is located in the low elevation slopes of the Columbia River Gorge, in the Western Cascades Lowlands and Valleys ecoregion. The ecoregion is dominated by western hemlock and Douglas-fir forests in a low elevation alpine environment. Western red cedar are also present in the project area, as are big leaf maple and alder trees. The underbrush contains sword fern, lady fern, Oregon grape, grasses and small shrubs. Brush Creek, a tributary to the Wind River, runs through the project area. Brush Creek has an approximately 19 ft. bank-full-width at the project location, with a rocky stream bed of boulders and cobbles, riffle pool complexes, and a gradient of approximately 5 %-7.5 %. The stream provides habitat to fish, including rainbow trout. Some reports show endangered steelhead in the stream, but in correspondence between BPA and Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), no endangered fish are present in Brush Creek due to impassable falls near the mouth of the creek. Macroinvertebrates and other small riparian animals also live in the stream. The forest in the greater project area provides habitat to large mammals like deer and elk, and raptors such as eagles and falcons as well as smaller birds such as Stellar's jay. Northern spotted owl critical habitat is present within 1,000 ft. of the project site.

The area shows signs of historic logging, with remnant stumps, and most Douglas fir and western hemlock are less than 24 inches diameter at breast height (DBH). Several mature western red cedar of approximately 36 inch to 48 inch DBH are present within 1000 feet west of the project area. The area is currently managed for wildlife habitat, recreation and silviculture, though it appears no timber harvests have occurred in recent history. The town of Carson, WA is located approximately 1.5 miles to the southwest.

The project area is owned by the State of Washington and managed by the Washington Dept. of Natural Resources (WA DNR). Development in the vicinity consists of the gravel BPA transmission line access road, a bridge that spans Brush Creek, a retaining wall supporting the access road near the creek, and the high voltage transmission ROW, which is approximately 0.25 miles from the project area.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

Environmental Resource Impacts

No Potential for Significance

No Potential for Significance, with Conditions

1. Historic and Cultural Resources



Explanation:

BPA engaged in consultation with the Washington Dept. of Archaeology and Historic Preservation (DAHP), the Cowlitz Indian Tribe, Washington Dept. of Natural Resources, and the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation. BPA identified an area of potential effect and detailed proposed project activities. BPA sent a determination letter on May 3, 2019, stating that the undertaking would result in no historic properties effected. DAHP responded with concurrence on May 9th, 2019. No other parties responded to BPA's determination during consultation.

Note:

- 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



Explanation:

The project would require substantial ground-disturbing activities. The new access road alignment cut would generate approximately 1700 cubic yards of material; primarily silts and rock. Excess material would be spread in the ROW nearby in an upland location away from drainages and waterways and stabilized with native seed and mulch, used as road fill material, or hauled off and disposed. No prime or unique farmlands would be affected by the project.

Note:

- Disturbed cuts and fills would be seeded with a native seed mix and stabilized using erosion and sediment control BMPs. Revegetation efforts would be monitored to promote success.

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



Explanation:

Excavation and grading associated with road realignment would disturb vegetation adjacent to the existing roadway. Approximately 20 large trees would need to be removed, comprised of Douglas fir, and ranging from 6" to 26" DBH. The understory, including Oregon grape, lady fern and sword fern, would also be impacted. Vegetation would also be impacted at the nearby fill location where the excess material would be spread within the ROW, which would have a footprint of approximately 0.5 acres. Vegetation in this location consists of native grasses, sword fern and other native forbs, as well as invasive weeds.

BPA obtained an official species list for the project area from U.S. Fish and Wildlife on July 29th, 2019. No Endangered Species Act (ESA) listed plant species or critical habitat are present in the project area. Therefore, the proposed action would have no effect on special-status plant species, and limited impacts to other native and non-native vegetation.

Note:

- Post construction, all disturbed areas would be reseeded with a native grass and forb seed mix and stabilized
- BPA would conduct follow-up monitoring to ensure the success of the revegetation

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



Explanation:

Proposed construction activity in the project area would likely temporarily disturb wildlife such as deer, birds, and small mammals due to the presence of human activity, machinery operation, and noise. Several large Douglas fir trees would be removed for the new road alignment, which would disturb birds and other animals in the immediate project area and remove habitat. Disturbed soils adjacent to the new road would be planted with native grass, which would potentially restore some habitat to wildlife. The planned tree removal would occur late in the nesting bird season, post July 15th. If tree removal occurs during the nesting bird season, nesting bird surveys would be conducted prior to tree removal.

BPA obtained an official species list for the project area from U.S. Fish and Wildlife (USFWS) on July 29th, 2019. Gray wolf, North American wolverine, northern spotted owl, and yellow-billed cuckoo are listed in the project area under the Endangered Species Act. BPA environmental staff surveyed the project area to determine the suitability for federally protected wildlife species. BPA also reached out to the WA DNR habitat biologist to discuss ESA species and the proposed work. While northern spotted owl critical habitat is nearby (approximately 1000 ft.) according to WA DNR the project area does not contain suitable northern spotted owl habitat and is not managed as suitable habitat. BPA analyzed recent habitat modeling data provided by U.S. Fish & Wildlife for the project area which confirmed that the project area does not provide suitable northern spotted owl habitat. In addition, no suitable habitat was identified for gray wolf and North American wolverine. No critical habitat for these species is present in the project area. BPA determined that the project would have no effect on ESA-listed wildlife species in the project area.

Note:

- If tree removal occurs during the nesting bird season, nesting bird surveys would be conducted prior to tree removal.

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



Explanation:

The project is located near the banks of Brush Creek, a tributary to the Wind River, which flows into the Columbia River approximately 2.5 miles to the southwest of the project area. The road alignment project location is approximately 80 feet from the northwest banks of Brush Creek. BPA discussed the installation of timber within the Brush Creek ordinary high water mark (OHWM) with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), WA DNR engineers and habitat biologists, and WDFW habitat biologists. BPA submitted a Clean Water Act Section 404 joint permit application to the USACE and the timber placement has been authorized under a Nationwide Permit 13, Bank Stabilization. The location of the proposed timber placement within the Brush Creek channel is typically dry during the low-flow summer period.

No flood plains are present within or near the project area.

Brush Creek has resident fish, but does not contain ESA-listed species according to WDFW. The proposed timber placement within Brush Creek would have a dual benefit as bank stabilization and fish habitat enhancement.

Note:

- Erosion and sediment control best management practices (BMPs) would be implemented to minimize impacts to Brush Creek from project activities including road realignment and timber placement.
- During construction, BPA and BPA's contractors would implement the conditions of the Clean Water Act Section 404 Permit.
- To minimize impacts to resident fish and water quality, all in-water work would be conducted during the approved in-water work August 1st - August 15th.

6. **Wetlands**

Explanation:

No temporary or permanent impacts to wetlands are proposed.

7. **Groundwater and Aquifers**

Explanation:

Proposed excavation for the project would not be at a depth or extent that would intercept groundwater or impact aquifers.

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

Explanation:

The project is located within the Columbia Gorge National Scenic Area, designated as a Special Management Area - Forest, and managed by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS). BPA notified the USFS of the planned work on April 22, 2019. Because the planned activity would be in support of existing transmission facility operation and maintenance, the activity falls under the savings provision for BPA transmission facilities that is contained in the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area Act of 1986 (Act). As falling under the savings provision, the activity would be exempt from management plan consistency review under the Act.

9. **Visual Quality**

Explanation:

Current visual quality in the project area consists of a gravel BPA access road adjacent to Brush Creek, surrounded by forests of Douglas fir and western hemlock. Project activities, while widening the road footprint and adding additional timber within Brush Creek, would not substantially alter existing visual quality. At the location where the excess material would potentially be spread, the area is cleared transmission ROW, adjacent to an access road, and has previously been disturbed. The addition of fill material in this location would not substantially alter existing visual quality.

Note:

- Disturbed cuts and fills would be stabilized and revegetated with a native seed mix. Vegetation would be monitored to ensure success.

10. **Air Quality**

Explanation:

Some dust may be generated due to construction activity and disturbed soils. If necessary, a fugitive dust plan would be implemented to control dust generation.

11. **Noise**

Explanation:

Some temporary noise may be generated due to construction activity. However, the project is located in a fairly remote area and the construction noise associated with tree removal, excavation and regrading would not be substantial to nearby receptors.

12. **Human Health and Safety**

Explanation:

A site specific safety plan would be developed by the construction contractor and implemented in the field.

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: NA

- 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: NA

- 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: NA

- 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: NA

Landowner Notification, Involvement, or Coordination

Description:

During the planning phase, BPA has notified and coordinated with the landowner, WA DNR, as well as the USFS Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area office. The road widening component of the project is at the request of WA DNR who owns and manages the land and shares the access road easement with BPA. BPA will continue to coordinate with WA DNR throughout the implementation phase of the project.

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

Signed: /s/ Aaron Siemers
Aaron Siemers, EPR-4
Environmental Protection Specialist

Date: April 9, 2020