

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy



Proposed Action: Upper Grande Ronde Headwaters Hand Crew and Small Streams Restoration Project

Project No.: 1992-026-01

Project Manager: Tracy Hauser, EWL-4

Location: Union County, Oregon

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 US Forest Service, Wallowa Whiteman National Forest (WWNF), La Grande Ranger District (District) to conduct aquatic habitat restoration activities along the Upper Grande Ronde River, Limber Jim Creek and Chicken Creek located approximately 20 miles southwest of La Grande in Union County, Oregon. The proposed restoration activities would occur on WWNF lands and the WWNF would be the lead federal agency for complying with federal, state and local laws and regulations.

Proposed work would include adding wood into about 9.5 miles of stream (2.5 miles of Upper Grande Ronde River, 4.0 miles of Limber Jim Creek and 3.0 miles of Chicken Creek) using both handcrews and mini excavators. The District would improve existing restoration channel-spanning debris structures within the main streams and create channel-spanning debris structures within side channels to increase habitat complexity, promote pool development, and activate floodplain and side-channel habitats. All three streams support summer steelhead, spring Chinook salmon, bull trout and red band trout.

The District would add to and create debris jams (consisting of tree tops, branches and small trees less than 8 inches in diameter) in the streams at an average of 30 - 40 jams per mile. Trees for instream structures would be harvested from within 200 feet on each side of the streams. All of the material would be felled and transported to the streams by mini excavators. Tree felling and transport of the materials would occur in June through October. Placement of the trees in the streams would occur during the in-water-work window of July 1 – 31 and continue through October, as approved by federal and state regulatory agencies. Mini excavators would be used to place wood within limited areas of the streams were the distance from the stream to the trees are the farthest. The majority of wood would be placed by hand crews to help minimize instream disturbance. The work would not overlap with Chinook or bull trout spawning areas and would occur after steelhead have emerged from redds. Chinook, steelhead and bull trout redds would also not be impacted by the placement of wood from August through October.

Funding the proposed activities fulfills commitments under the 2020 National Marine Fisheries Service Columbia River System Biological Opinion (2020 NMFS CRS BiOp). These proposed

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 activities would occur in the Upper Grande Ronde Subbasin. Legal descriptions for the project sites are: Upper Grande Ronde River T6S, R36E, Sections 4, 5 and 9; Limber Jim Creek T5S, R35E, Section 32 and Chicken Creek T6S, R35.5E, Sections 3, 10, 11, 14 and 15. The Subbasin consists of moderately sloped, rolling mountains. Elevations range from approximately 1,000 to 5,000 feet. Most of the Subbasin is forested with interspersed areas of grasslands and scrub/shrub. Land use is dominated by forestry and livestock grazing.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: February 17, 2021, the WWNF South Zone Archaeologist reviewed the proposed project and determined there were “no historic properties affected” and the project fit within the Programmatic Agreement between the WWNF and Oregon State Historic Preservation Office. Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation were consulted – no response. WWNF is the lead federal agency for compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act for this project.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No with Conditions

Explanation: Minimal soil disturbance would occur; use of mini-excavators and work timing would occur when soils are dry and erosion control measure would be used.

Notes:

- Erosion control methods (water bars, replanting, sediment barriers, mulches or erosion fabrics, etc.) would be put in place before season-ending precipitation event
- Effective ground cover would be placed over 65% of the disturbed soil after seeding
- Bank stabilizing trees would not be pushed over

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

Potential for Significance: No with Conditions

Explanation: Although ground disturbance is proposed, there are no ESA-listed, state listed, or sensitive plant species known to exist on the project sites. Project areas with non-listed plants disturbed as a result of implementation would be planted with native vegetation following project completion.

Notes:

- Prior to implementation a qualified botanist would conduct a field survey to verify the presence or absence of sensitive plants known or suspected in the project area. If sensitive plants are found, they would be avoided. The botanist would then evaluate the results and ensure consistency with the determination of effects presented in the

Biological Evaluation.

- Locally sourced and genetically appropriate native plant materials would be used for all revegetation efforts connected with project activities. District Invasive Plant, Botany, or Native Plant staff would be consulted for specific guidance.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Eight sensitive species are known to exist on the project sites: Columbia spotted frog, bald eagle, white-headed woodpecker, Townsend's big eared bat, fringed myotis, fir pinwheel, thinlip tightcoil and shiny tightcoil. The District obtained ESA Section 7 coverage from the US Fish and Wildlife Service under the Programmatic Biological Opinion for Aquatic Restoration Activities in the States of Oregon, Washington, and portions of California, Idaho and Nevada (ARBO II) on 11/24/20, and would implement the terms and conditions of ARBO II to avoid impacting individuals or habitats. Non-status wildlife may be temporarily disturbed by construction traffic and noise, but would likely avoid the area during this time and return once the project work is completed.

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

Potential for Significance: No with Conditions

Explanation: Temporary sedimentation would be generated with instream work. The project would impact 9.5 miles of stream. The District received authorization from the US Army Corps of Engineers on 4/9/21 (Verification Letter NWP-2021-168) to use the Clean Water Act (CWA) Section 404 Regional General Permit-4 (RGP-4) and associated Oregon Department of Environmental Quality CWA Section 401 Water Quality Certification. The District would implement the terms and conditions of RGP-4 while placing wood below the ordinary high-water mark at the project streams.

All streams contain ESA-listed summer steelhead, spring/summer Chinook salmon and bull trout. The District obtained ESA Section 7 coverage from the National Marine Fisheries Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service under the Programmatic Biological Opinion for ARBO II on 11/24/20 and approval to work outside the in-water-work window from both the federal and state agencies on 4/13/21. The District would implement all terms and conditions to avoid or minimize potential adverse effects to the listed fish. Non-status fish (such as redband trout) may be temporarily disturbed by construction traffic and noise, but would likely avoid the area during this time and return once the project work is completed.

Notes:

- Bank stabilizing trees would not be pushed over
- Adequate quantity of trees would be retained within 30 feet of stream bank for future instream wood recruitment
- Equipment passes over streamside areas would be limited to one to two passes, where possible, to prevent vegetation loss, trail creation, and compaction

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The project would avoid on-site wetlands; the District would implement all terms and conditions of the RGP-4. The project is expected to increase wetland function at the proposed sites over the existing conditions.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Although ground disturbance is proposed, the work is not expected to have a substantial effect on groundwater and aquifers. The project structures would have a positive effect on groundwater recharge and water quality once the new wood structures have slowed streamflow and spread water across the floodplains and raise the water table, thereby creating new wetlands and aquatic habitat.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No change in land use would occur for the proposed project. The project activities would be consistent with the WWNF land management area designations.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The newly installed wood structures would be visually consistent with adjacent vegetation and the topography of the surrounding area, and would not be located in a visually sensitive area. Any change to the visual quality due to construction vehicles or equipment would be short term and temporary.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: A temporary increase in emissions and dust from vehicles accessing the field site would be very minor and short term during construction, but would resume to normal conditions immediately once the project is completed.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed work would result in a temporary increase in ambient noise. Any noise emitted from construction equipment would be short term and temporary during daylight hours and would cease following project completion.

12. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed work is not considered hazardous nor does it result in any health or safety risks to the general public. There would be no soil contamination or hazardous conditions, no CERCLA sites, and no changes to electric or magnetic fields as a result of the proposed project.

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: No notification – All work on WWNF administered lands.

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

Signed: /s/ Brenda Aguirre May 27, 2021
Brenda Aguirre, ECF-4 Date
Environmental Protection Specialist