

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy



Proposed Action: West Fork Little Bear Creek Instream Habitat Improvement Project #2

Project No.: 2008-604-00

Project Manager: Matthew Schwartz – EWM-4

Location: Latah County, ID

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 Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) to implement the second phase of a habitat restoration project on a degraded portion of West Fork Little Bear Creek in the Potlatch watershed. The previous project phase treated a 0.9-mile-long stretch along the upstream landowner's property and was constructed in 2023. The work would benefit Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed steelhead.

Current habitat conditions include a flow-limited river segment that exhibits elevated summer water temperatures, lacks fine sediments, pools and thermal refugia, contains little instream woody material or other off-channel habitat, has a disengaged floodplain, and has limited overstory shading from riparian vegetation. The project proposes to increase instream complexity throughout about a 0.4-mile-long reach with the use of directionally felled trees. The intent is to restore natural processes and cause pooling, sediment sorting, and improved heterogeneous habitat.

The trees to be used are located on the project landowner's property on the adjacent hillslope. Riparian and floodplain disturbance would be minimized by using a skilled sawyer contractor team to directionally fell the wood into the stream and move it with rigging or cabling to minimize the use of excavators. Brush mattresses, consisting of racking material lost from felling and hauling trees and disturbed vegetation from access routes, would be inserted around felled trees to provide cover in lower velocity pools.

In select downstream locations where additional stability is desired, larger cross-channel spanning structures (e.g., log jams) would be constructed to deflect stress from the bank and naturally collect woody debris over time. Large logs would be placed to span the channel wetted width and large, intertwined trees would be placed on top to extend and intermingle into bank riparian trees for additional stability. Large native boulders located within the floodplain would be repositioned to increase the stability of the structure during high river flows. These structures would be located toward the downstream end of the reach to catch racking material and minimize wood mobility downstream. All wood treatments would be designed to have some flexible movement.

An excavator would be used for harvesting trees, log jam construction and brush mattress installation. Construction access would be through existing routes (Highway 99 and a private residential road) and an old railroad bed, since turned into a recreational trail, adjacent to the creek. The previous phase of the project used the railroad bed for construction access up to the end of the property line. This project would use the same portion and continue along the trail adjacent to the proposed project location to the downstream end. An existing staging area that is at least 150 feet from the stream and along an existing private road would be used along with an additional staging area on the railroad bed at the downstream end of the project. The timing of construction would occur during the approved in-water work window (starting in July) when there is minimal flow, which would minimize disturbance and sedimentation. IDFG would conduct fish salvage in any pools that may be disturbed during construction and relocate aquatic organisms prior to the start of construction. Disturbed soils would be seeded with woodland and wetland seed mixes after construction. Herbaceous and woody species would be planted to rehabilitate the riparian zone.

Funding the proposed activities fulfills commitments under the 2020 National Marine Fisheries Service Columbia River System Biological Opinion (2020 NMFS CRS BiOp). These actions also support Bonneville's commitments to the State of Idaho in the Columbia River Fish Accord, as amended, 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 (Northwest Power Act) (16 U.S.C. (USC) 839 et seq.).

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.

Jacquelyn Schei
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.

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Project Site Description

The project is located on private property about six miles south of Troy, ID. West Fork Little Bear Creek is an intermittent stream that runs dry in the late summer. It has been impacted by decades of human influences dating back to the 1880s when mining and logging were prevalent in Idaho. Activities included construction of a railroad grade alongside and through the riparian area, straightening of the stream channel, and logging in and around the riparian area. At the project site, this has resulted in lack of riparian and streamside wood density, over widening and lack of shade, loss of roughness and complexity resulting in faster waters with decreased pool and resting habitat, bank erosion, sediment input, and loss of floodplain interaction. The railroad tracks alongside the project site have since been removed, but the railroad bed remains and has since been converted to a recreational trail, the Latah Trail, maintained and managed by Latah County.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: BPA initiated consultation with the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, the Nez Perce Tribe, Coeur d'Alene Tribe, Spokane Tribe of Indians, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, and the Idaho State Historic Preservation Office (ID SHPO). BPA determined that the implementation of the proposed undertaking would result in no historic properties affected. On June 12, 2024, ID SHPO concurred with BPA's determination of no historic properties affected. The Tribal Historic Preservation Officer for the Nez Perce Tribe reached out with clarifying questions about the project, but no other comments or concerns were expressed. No responses were received from other tribes that were contacted.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The use of an excavator and felling trees may cause minor impacts to the soil. Construction access would use many of the existing access routes as used in Phase 1 of the project. The project would repair any temporary access routes and staging areas back to their original condition. Soil disturbance and erosion into the channel has been minimized in the design, which relies on large wood and boulder placement to reengage the floodplain. Work would occur in periods of low precipitation and low to no stream flow to further minimize erosion and disturbance. Large wood structures would be located to deflect stream flows that currently cause bank erosion.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No special-status or ESA-listed plant species are known to be present in the project area. There would be temporary vegetation disturbances associated with tree felling and construction activities. Individual trees felled for instream wood structures would be those that are in poor health and/or do not provide existing shade or cover; mostly over 40 feet from the stream bank. Plants in the work area may be crushed or destroyed during the tree felling and construction. Native vegetation would be salvaged during construction and then replanted in any disturbed areas, along with additional native seed, willows, and shrubs.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There are no federal or state special-status wildlife species or their habitats known to occur in the project area. Wildlife present during project activities may be temporarily disturbed by human presence and noise, but effects would be temporary and removed once construction was complete. Any wildlife displaced during construction activities would likely return.

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

Potential for Significance: No with Conditions

Explanation: Federally-listed Snake River steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) are present in the Potlatch River watershed. There are no other federally-listed or state special-status species in the project area. The project's potential impacts to federally-listed species would be covered under BPA's Habitat Improvement Program Biological Opinion and would implement conservation measures that minimize risk. Project activities would involve some in-water work to improve channel complexity and improve shade. However, flow conditions at the time of construction would be low to non-existent and at a time when fish are unlikely to be present and work area isolation is not needed.

Notes:

- Project sponsor would adhere to all applicable site-specific conservation measures identified in the HIP consultation and approval.
- Instream work would be conducted during the established work window determined by IDFG.
- IDFG would obtain a joint 404 permit from Idaho Department of Water Resources and the Army Corps of Engineers under the Clean Water Act prior to project implementation.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The project would not take place within or around wetlands, and therefore no potential to affect wetlands.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No new wells or use of groundwater are proposed. No herbicide use is proposed. The proposed actions would have no impacts to groundwater or aquifers.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Road access to the project area would be through a former railway corridor that is now used as a recreational trail along one side of the stream, which can support small trucks and UTVs/ATVs. There may be temporary localized disruption to trail access and use during tree felling and construction (a few days to a week) but project activities would not affect use of the remainder of the trail. Trail closures and signage to protect trail users would be coordinated through Latah County. There would be no long-term change to land use.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed work would have minimal long term effect on visual quality and the project would be returning the area to a more natural condition.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be minor, temporary effects to the air quality from dust and exhaust due to equipment/vehicle use during construction. Normal conditions would return upon project completion.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed work would result in a temporary increase in ambient noise during construction activities. Any noise emitted from 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: All personnel would use best management practices to protect worker health and safety. Proposed project actions would not adversely impact human health and safety. Operational activities would follow applicable health and safety standards. Trail closures and signage would be coordinated with Latah County to ensure public 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: IDFG has coordinated with the private landowner to obtain their permission for the proposed activities. IDFG has also coordinated with the Latah Trail Foundation and Latah County to obtain a temporary construction easement and review plans for trail signage and temporary restrictions to public access during construction.

Signed:

Jacquelyn Schei
Environmental Protection Specialist