

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy



Proposed Action: Pole Creek Habitat Complexity Project Phase 3

Project No.: 2007-268-00

Project Manager: Eric Leitzinger, EWM - 4

Location: Custer County, Idaho

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) along with the NOAA Fisheries Pacific Coastal Salmon Recovery Fund (PCSRF) proposes to fund the Custer Soil and Water Conservation District (CSWCD) to increase habitat availability and improve habitat complexity along roughly 2,800 feet of Pole Creek. This would be the third phase of habitat restoration work in the general project area and would be implemented concurrently with Phase 2¹, which BPA funded. Because Phase 3 has joint funding, it was designed separately and implementation timing was dependent on PCSRF funding availability. Funding was awarded in time to plan implementation concurrently with Phase 2, but if needed, the two phases could have been implemented separately and independently. Pole Creek has historically supported all life stages of Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed Snake River Chinook salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*), Snake River steelhead (*O. mykiss*), and bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) and is designated as critical habitat for Chinook and steelhead.

The project would reconnect the stream to an abandoned meander at the upstream end of the project area, adding approximately 240 feet to the total stream length. As the meander is connected, a short section (about 90 feet) of the current channel would be abandoned between the upstream end of the reconnected meander where it leaves the current stream course and the downstream end where it rejoins the current stream course. This segment would be de-watered and filled with excess excavated materials. The ends of the filled segment abutting the stream would be planted with willow clump banks (approximately 40 feet on each end of the filled segment) to provide bank stability and riparian cover. Willow clump banks would have eight willow clumps per 20-foot segment, woven together with slash wood, and secured with 6-foot posts driven into the ground.

¹ Bonneville Power Administration. October 15, 2024. Supplement Analysis for the Columbia River Basin Tributary Habitat Restoration Programmatic Environmental Assessment (DOE/EA 2126/SA-59) Pole Creek Habitat Restoration Project Phase 2. Bonneville Power Administration, Portland, OR. 12 pages.

One narrow side channel would be developed adjacent to an existing low-lying sedge bank where the ground can be enhanced with minimal excavation. The side channel would reconnect to Pole Creek, creating a U-shaped bend about 50 feet long. Excess excavated material would be placed on existing ground in the middle of the side channel bend to create an island (approximately 200 square feet). Up to four live willow clumps would be positioned horizontally along the upstream edge of the island and one live willow clump would be planted vertically on the downstream end of the island. Sedge mats (salvaged from excavated areas within this project) or native gravel would be placed on the surface and banks lined with pre-vegetated fiber erosion-control coir logs.

Five newly created sedge/willow bench structures would be installed along banks (about 310 feet) to protect from erosion or narrow the channel in key locations. The bench structures would consist of a transplanted sedge mat and one willow clump every 4 feet and supported by a pre-vegetated coir log on the river side of the bench. The newly reconnected meander and side channel would be vegetated using live willow stakes (about 200 feet along banks with three rows of stakes planted approximately 3 feet apart).

The project would use temporary staging areas and access roads that would be established in Phase 2 and existing farm roads to access the site. Heavy equipment, such as an excavator or track hoe, would be used for construction. Instream work would be completed during the approved in-water work window for this location and in-water work areas would be isolated with coffer dams and dewatered. Before dewatering the stream segment, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game would conduct fish salvage to capture and relocate all fish. All disturbed areas that are not planted with sedge or willow materials would be seeded with a native seed mix after construction.

Funding the proposed activities fulfills commitments under the 2020 National Marine Fisheries Service Columbia River System Biological Opinion (2020 NMFS CRS BiOp) and the 2020 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Columbia River System BiOp (2020 FWS CRS BiOp). These actions also support ongoing efforts to mitigate for effects of the Federal Columbia River Power System 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. § 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; 89 FR 34074, April 30, 2024), 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.²

Jacquelyn Schei
Environmental Protection Specialist

Concur:

Katey C. Grange
NEPA Compliance Officer

Attachment(s): Environmental Checklist

² BPA is aware that the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), on February 25, 2025, issued an interim final rule to remove its NEPA implementing regulations at 40 C.F.R. Parts 1500–1508. Based on CEQ guidance, and to promote completion of its NEPA review in a timely manner and without delay, in this CX BPA is voluntarily relying on the CEQ regulations, in addition to DOE's own regulations implementing NEPA at 10 C.F.R. Part 1021, to meet its obligations under NEPA, 42 U.S.C. §§ 4321 et seq.

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: Pole Creek Habitat Complexity Project Phase 3

Project Site Description

Pole Creek is a tributary to the Salmon River located within the headwaters of the Upper Salmon River Watershed. The overall multi-phased project area extends 1.8 miles up Pole Creek from the confluence with the Salmon River. Phase 3 is the most upstream reach of the project. The project would occur on private property used for cattle grazing located within the Sawtooth National Recreation Area (SNRA), approximately 25 miles south of Stanley in Blaine County, Idaho. The availability of quality spawning and rearing habitat in Pole Creek has been significantly diminished from decades of irrigation, plowing and grazing on nearby lands, and straightening of the channel. SNRA has an agreement with the landowner to protect the area from public recreation and agricultural uses and there is existing exclusion fencing along the project area. Despite this and past restoration efforts, including moving pivot systems that crossed the creek, consolidating and moving points of diversion, and drilling groundwater wells to reduce irrigation withdrawals, riparian conditions have not improved on their own and the stream remains over-widened with high velocity flows and lacks riparian vegetation and in-stream habitat features needed to help stabilize banks.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: BPA made a determination of no historic properties affected on January 19, 2024 (BPA CR Project No.: ID 2023 036). Consulting parties included Shoshone Bannock Tribes of the Fort Hall Reservation, Shoshone-Paiute Tribes of the Duck Valley Indian Reservation, Nez Perce Tribe, and the Idaho State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). No responses were received during the 30-day regulatory response period; concurrence was presumed and consultation completed.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be temporary impacts to geology and soils due to displacement and compaction of soil from the operation of heavy equipment to excavate soils for the meander and side channel and for installing willow clump banks and sedge-willow benches. Erosion and sediment control best management practices would be implemented prior to work to minimize potential for instream turbidity or excessive runoff during construction. Work areas would be contoured to match the surrounding grade following construction and seeded with native, riparian plant species to facilitate soil recovery.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No ESA-listed species or state special-status plants are known to be present in the project area. The USFWS Information for Planning and Conservation (IPaC) tool lists the whitebark pine (*Pinus albicaulis*), ESA-listed as Threatened, as having the potential to be in the project area. However, decades of agricultural practices along Pole Creek and surrounding areas have left the project area free of any trees, including whitebark pine. Therefore, the project would not impact any ESA-listed plant species. There would be temporary impacts to existing vegetation including crushing and removal by heavy equipment, excavation, and trampling from work crews. Impacts would be minimized by using existing access routes, planting native vegetation, and seeding disturbed areas after construction to help reestablish native plant communities.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No ESA-listed or state special-status wildlife species or habitats are within the project site. IPaC lists the North American wolverine (*Gulo gulo luscus*) and the Canada lynx (*Lynx canadensis*), both ESA-listed Threatened, as having the potential to be in the project area. In addition, IPaC lists the monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*), ESA-proposed Threatened, and Suckley's cuckoo bumble bee (*Bombus suckleyi*), ESA-proposed Endangered, as having the potential to be present in the project area. There are no critical habitats for ESA-listed or proposed species in the project area and no confirmed presence of any of the species in the project area. Due to current agricultural land use practices and lack of native vegetation, it is highly unlikely these species would be present and there is no known occurrence of any in the project area. Therefore, there would be no impact to ESA-listed or proposed wildlife species from the project.

No habitats would be modified to any degree that might permanently displace resident wildlife, though some may be temporarily displaced by disturbance from construction activities. Human presence and activity associated with construction would temporarily disturb and displace nearby wildlife, but long-term displacement resulting in competition for nearby habitats is unlikely. In the long term, the project would re-establish native, riparian vegetation that would provide more habitat for wildlife than exists now.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: ESA-listed Snake River Chinook salmon, Snake River steelhead, and bull trout are found in the project area. No state special-status species occupy the project area. The project was reviewed and consulted on under BPA's Habitat Improvement Program (HIP) programmatic biological opinions and would adhere to all applicable site-specific conservation measures, including turbidity monitoring requirements, approved work timing, and work area isolation. Excavation for the meander and side channel and installing bank stability structures would have temporary negative impacts to fish and fish habitat, specifically sediment transport and delivery and displacement of individuals. Some aquatic invertebrates and amphibians may be displaced or killed by mechanical activities, but quick re-occupation of this site by the same or other members of the same classes of animals following construction is anticipated. Ground-disturbing activities would increase the risk of erosion and sedimentation during and immediately after excavation activities. This increase would be limited to the time of construction, primarily during excavation, would not be expected to last more than several hours, and would be mitigated by the use of erosion control measures throughout project construction. Overall, the proposed actions would improve long-term conditions for fish by slowing the velocity of flows through the project area and providing more riparian cover. The project has obtained a permit issued by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act (Nationwide Permit No. 27; project number NWW-202400197) and would adhere to all requirements, conditions, and prescriptions set forth.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The USFWS National Wetlands Inventory identifies Pole Creek as a riverine wetland and adjacent riparian areas and former creek beds in much of the project area as emergent and seasonally flooded wetlands. By design, project features would be constructed or installed in a wetland, either instream, along the creek bank, or in abandoned, low-lying former creek channels such as the abandoned meander. Overall, about 0.5 acres of wetlands would be temporarily impacted by the project. The project has obtained a permit issued by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act (Nationwide Permit No. 27; project number NWW-202400197) and would adhere to all requirements, conditions, and prescriptions set forth. Restoration activities would support improved wetland and riparian structure in the long term and would not have adverse impacts to wetlands.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No new wells or uses of groundwater are proposed. There would be potential for contamination of groundwater from fuel or fluid drips or spills from the heavy equipment used, but spills and drips with the volume necessary to contaminate groundwater are unlikely. Onsite spill kits would also minimize the potential for spills and drips to be of sufficient quantity to contaminate groundwater.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be no land use changes or changes to specially-designated areas. The project is on private land within the Sawtooth National Recreation Area. The area is currently protected from public recreation and agricultural uses for the benefit of fish and wildlife and would remain so following this project.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Temporary and permanent changes would occur during project implementation. Short-term changes to the landscape would occur during construction, such as work zone conditions, vehicles, and equipment. Long-term changes resulting from creating sinuosity in the stream and native, riparian plantings could be seen from nearby farm roads. There would be no large-scale, prominent vegetative, landform, or structural changes. Thus, immediate changes to the visual landscape would be minor. Over time, the project would alter the landscape and visual character of Pole Creek by increasing vegetative cover along the creek and returning it to a more natural condition.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: A temporary increase in emissions and dust from vehicles accessing the project site would be very minor and short-term during construction but would return to normal conditions once the project is completed. These impacts would be similar to those occurring during normal agricultural operations in the area. 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. Any noise emitted from construction equipment would be short-term and temporary during daylight hours and would cease following project completion. Noise from construction is not expected to exceed the typical noise from agricultural equipment operating in the area.

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. Operating construction vehicles and equipment inherently carries potential safety risks to operators, however, best management practices such as daily on-site safety precautions would minimize that risk during construction activities.

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: The SNRA (U.S. Forest Service) has an agreement with the private landowner to protect the project area from public recreation and agricultural operations to support fish and wildlife. CSWCD has coordinated with the landowner and the SNRA in the development of this project.

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

Signed:

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Environmental Protection Specialist