

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy



Proposed Action: Upper Cottonwood Creek Restoration Phase 1

Project No.: 2007-397-00

Project Manager: Allan Whiting, EWL-4

Location: Grant 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 Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon (CTWS) to implement a low-tech processed-based stream restoration (LTPBR) project in Grant County, Oregon. Monument Soil and Water Conservation District is a project partner. The project would occur on private land along Cottonwood Creek, which is a tributary of the North Fork John Day River. Cottonwood Creek provides spawning and rearing habitat and is designated critical habitat for Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed Mid-Columbia River (MCR) steelhead trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*).

The proposed project would install approximately 43 beaver dam analogs (BDAs), 26 large woody debris (LWD) features, and four LWD jams within an approximately one-mile length of Cottonwood Creek. The BDAs would span the creek channel and would be constructed of untreated wooden spikes driven vertically into the creek with willow, juniper, or pine tree material woven between them to simulate a beaver dam. LWD features would be one- to two-log structures placed along and across the channel, secured with driven posts crossed at an angle to prevent floating.

An excavator would be used to transport materials to each BDA and LWD installation site and drive posts for these features. Additional equipment used for construction may include pickup trucks and all-terrain vehicles (ATV)/utility task vehicles (UTVs). An existing road network on the private ranch property would be used for accessing the creek to construct the project; no new access road development would be required.

The project is intended to improve natural stream and riparian processes by promoting LWD retention, slowing high flows, and increasing the stream's connection with the floodplain. The increased physical complexity within the channel is intended to benefit MCR steelhead and their habitat.

These actions would support conservation of ESA-listed species considered in the 2020 ESA consultation with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) on the operation and maintenance of the Columbia River System. These actions also support BPA's commitments to CTWS in the Columbia River Fish Accord, as amended, while also supporting ongoing efforts to mitigate for the 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 (North Power Act)(16 U.S.C. (USC) 839 et seq.).

Findings: In accordance with Section 1021.102 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; 90 FR 29676, July 3, 2025 [Interim Final Rule]) and *DOE National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), Implementing Procedures* (dated June 30, 2025), BPA has determined the following:

- 1) The proposed action fits within a class of actions listed in Appendix B of 10 CFR 1021;
- 2) The proposal has not been segmented to meet the definition of a categorical exclusion; and
- 3) There are no extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action that may affect the significance of the environmental effects of the proposal (see attached Environmental Evaluation).

Based on these determinations, BPA finds that the proposed action is categorically excluded from further NEPA review.¹

John Vlastelicia
Environmental Protection Specialist

Concur:

Katey C. Grange
NEPA Compliance Officer

Attachment(s): Environmental Checklist

¹ 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 the interim final rule to revise DOE NEPA regulations implementing NEPA at 10 C.F.R. Part 1021 and NEPA Implementing Procedures (dated June 30, 2025), to meet its obligations under NEPA, 42 U.S.C. §§ 4321 et seq.

Categorical Exclusion Environmental Evaluation

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 site is located approximately 13 miles south of the town of Monument in northwestern Grant County, Oregon. The project area encompasses an approximately one-mile length of Cottonwood Creek that flows through a privately-owned ranch property, portions of which are used for livestock grazing. The project riparian area has been protected from grazing with an exclusion fence since about 2005, allowing a riparian forest condition that supports willow and alder trees and some beaver activity. Surrounding lands include grassy hillsides with trees including pine and juniper at varying densities. An unpaved road network is present near the creek in the project area, providing access to the proposed BDA and LWD installation points.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: BPA and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) agreed that USFWS, which is also providing funding for the project, would take the role of lead federal agency for compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. On July 11, 2024, USFWS initiated consultation with the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon, Burns-Paiute Tribe, and Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. On November 21, 2024, USFWS determined that the proposed project would result in no historic properties affected. SHPO concurred with the determination, and no other responses from the consulting parties were received during the 30-day comment period.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Installation of the BDAs and LWD features would not involve soil disturbance from excavation or fill placement. Small areas of localized soil disturbance and compaction could be expected at each of these structures from an excavator accessing the stream from the nearby road and from driving posts for these structures. The existing ranch road's close proximity to the stream throughout the project reach would limit the amount of off-road access disturbance needed, and stream access points would be selected to minimize soil disturbance in riparian areas.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Small areas of riparian vegetation could be disturbed from equipment accessing each of the BDA and LWD sites from the adjacent ranch road. The close proximity of the existing road to the creek throughout the project reach would limit vegetation disturbance needed, and specific creek access points would be selected to minimize damage to riparian plants. The site is not within the geographic range of any ESA-listed plant species, and there are no documented occurrences of state special-status plant species in the project area.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Wildlife including deer, elk, coyote, various small mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians may use the project area. Construction activity could temporarily deter wildlife from using the area, due to noise, visual disturbance, and physical disturbance from equipment operation and human activity.

The project site is within the geographic range of the ESA-listed Endangered gray wolf (*Canis lupus*). However, the project site is not within an area of documented gray wolf occurrences; is not within a known or estimated gray wolf use area, as identified by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife; and is not within designated critical habitat for gray wolf. The proposed project would have no effect on gray wolf.

The project site is also within the geographic range of the proposed Threatened monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*) and the proposed Endangered Suckley's cuckoo bumblebee (*Bombus suckleyi*). However, there are no documented occurrences of these species within the project area; the project area does not overlap with proposed critical habitat; and the project site does not feature habitat conditions most typically suited to these species, including abundant milkweed plants for the monarch butterfly and high floral diversity with flowering throughout the growing season for the Suckley's cuckoo bumblebee. State-sensitive wildlife species are not documented in the project area.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Cottonwood Creek is designated critical habitat for ESA-listed Threatened Middle Columbia River (MCR) steelhead trout. It is also habitat for redband trout.

The BDAs and LWD features would involve low-level temporary disturbance in Cottonwood Creek during installation. Fish present in areas of wood installation, including MCR steelhead, could be displaced from those sections of creek while in-water work is occurring. The project would not involve dewatering the stream or fish capture; instead, flow in the perennial creek would be maintained through the work areas in order to allow ESA-listed MCR steelhead and other fish present to remain in the stream and move upstream or downstream away from active work areas. Aquatic invertebrates or amphibians may also be displaced or killed by aquatic construction activity, but rapid re-occupation of these sites by the same classes of animals following construction is expected.

Construction best management practices (BMPs) including keeping equipment staging fueling areas at least 150 feet from the creek would be used to minimize potential for water quality impacts. In-water construction would be performed under a Nationwide Permit 27 (Aquatic Habitat Restoration) issued by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, as required by Section 404 of the federal Clean Water Act.

Installation of habitat-forming in-stream structures is authorized under the NMFS Biological Opinion issued for BPA's Habitat Improvement Program (HIP). While the project may affect, and is likely to adversely affect, ESA-listed MCR steelhead and critical habitat due to short-term construction-related effects from in-water work, the overall impacts would be beneficial to steelhead and other aquatic species. By slowing down the flow of water, providing in-stream structure, and improving the stream/floodplain connection, the proposed BDAs and LWD features would improve and expand habitat for fish and other aquatic species.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The installation of the BDAs and LWD features would involve temporary disturbance within the wetted perimeter of Cottonwood Creek. Stream access points would be selected to exclude heavy equipment from wetlands adjacent to the stream, and no fill to wetlands is proposed that would result in any permanent wetland loss or degradation. By improving the stream/floodplain connection, the project would enhance and potentially expand the riparian wetland area over time.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Construction of the projects would not involve groundwater withdrawals or discharges to groundwater. The BDAs are intended to improve the stream/floodplain connection and thus could result in improvements to groundwater recharge in the floodplain. No long-term adverse effects to groundwater or aquifers would result from the BDAs or LWD features once they are in place.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The project would not change the existing ranch land use of the site or surrounding area, and the site is not within any specially designated area that would prohibit the proposed activity. The project reach of Cottonwood Creek and its riparian area would continue to be protected from grazing by riparian fencing.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The project would not substantially change the visual character of the area. The BDAs would mimic natural beaver activity in streams. Similarly, LWDs would mimic natural conditions and both would increase floodplain activation, potentially adding some diversity of vegetation color and texture to the landscape. The project is on privately owned land, far from publicly traveled roads and public viewpoints.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The project would not introduce new operational sources of air emissions or otherwise affect air quality in the long term. Minor temporary increases in site emissions from gasoline and/or diesel-powered construction equipment and vehicles would occur during construction. Dust emissions from construction activities would be minor, based on the fact that there would be very little ground disturbance from the project and the primary project features (BDAs and LWD) would be installed within the creek. The project site is not located in an area designated by the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality as a Non-Attainment or Maintenance Area with current or historic issues meeting air quality standards.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The project would not introduce new permanent sources of noise and would not otherwise change noise levels in the area in the long term. BDA and LWD installation would temporarily elevate noise above background levels while work is occurring. Noise-generating construction equipment could include an excavator, pickup trucks, and ATVs/UTVs. Noise-generating activities would occur on a large private ranch in a rural area. There are no nearby sensitive noise receptors such as residential neighborhoods, schools, or hospitals.

12. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No permanent public health or safety hazards would be created by the installation of the BDAs or LWD features. Temporary safety hazards typical of construction activities would be expected from the operation of equipment and hand tools on the project site.

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 landowner of the project area is aware of the project and would be involved in implementation. Construction activities and schedule would be coordinated with the landowner prior to on-the-ground work.

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

Signed:

John Vlastelicia
Environmental Protection Specialist