Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy

Proposed Action: Culvert Replacements and Road Sediment Reduction in the Salmon River Watershed

Project No.: 2007-127-00

Project Manager: Matthew Schwartz – EWU -4

Location: Valley 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) proposes to fund the Nez Perce Tribe (NPT) to replace three undersized culverts that limit fish passage in the Payette National Forest (PNF) and make road improvements to support instream habitat in the Boise National Forest (BNF) in conjunction with the U.S. Forest Service (FS). The recovery and long-term viability of Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*), Chinook salmon (*O. tshawytscha*), and bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) populations within the Salmon River watershed are at risk due to the presence of passage barriers for fish at all life stages (such as those culverts proposed for removal), increased water temperatures, and sediment delivered to streams from forest roads which leads to degraded water quality.

NPT has worked with FS staff in PNF and BNF to assess whether culverts block passage of ESA-listed fish and prioritize future replacement based on species presence and quality and quantity of suitable habitat. They have identified three culverts on tributaries to Monumental Creek in PNF – Botha Creek, Boulder Creek, and Rainbow Creek - as high priorities for replacement. NPT has worked with the FS to design appropriate culvert replacements and develop plans to construct replacements.

Open bottom, concrete box culverts of a size to meet width requirements based on bankfull width of the stream and lengths to match the existing road are proposed for the three culvert replacements. The Botha Creek culvert would be replaced with a 43-foot-long by 13-foot-wide structure, Boulder Creek with a 35-foot-long by 9-foot-wide structure, and Rainbow Creek with a 25-foot-long by 9-foot-wide structure.

Erosion controls would be implemented and in-stream workspace would be isolated per approved plans prior to the start of work. Streams would be diverted, and the original channel dewatered, prior to excavation. Stranded aquatic organisms would be captured and moved out of the construction zone. Heavy equipment would be used to excavate and remove the existing structures, which would be disposed of off-site. Up to 80 feet of stream channel upstream and downstream of the culverts would be reconstructed to better match the existing

stream bed and banks. The road approaches on each side of the culverts would be reconstructed and sloped as needed to match the height of the new culverts and the material and grade of the existing road.

Staging areas would be located in the road, road pullouts, or previously-disturbed areas. Heavy equipment would generally operate from the existing road but may occasionally leave the roadway. Native materials (*e.g.,* substrate, riparian vegetation, rock, woody debris) excavated onsite, would be conserved and stockpiled for later use in channel reconstruction, filling around culverts, or other site rehabilitation. The slopes outside of the structures would be topped with topsoil. A native vegetation seed mix or native plants would be planted in disturbed areas.

In addition, the NPT would work in conjunction with the FS to make road improvements on Rice Creek Road in BNF to reduce sediment contributions to Rice Creek, an important stream for ESA-listed fish species. Rice Creek Road has been closed for a number of years due to a flood that caused significant damage to the road and multiple culverts. Due to a wildfire approaching the area in October 2024, the FS had to make emergency repairs to the road to allow fire vehicles to access the area. Three fords in perennial channels and four drivable dips in intermittent channels were constructed at washed out stream crossings on the road. Sediment mats were placed in the channel below the most downstream ford to trap suspended sediment. Inspection later showed they had absorbed substantial amounts of fine sediment.

Since an increase in vehicular traffic is expected with the reopening of the road, an increase in sediment delivery to Rice Creek is also anticipated. To reduce impacts, the project would harden the vehicular fords if needed, add cross drains to the road, and improve, with the addition of gravel and shaping the road, specific sections that have been identified as contributing the highest amounts of sediment to the creek. Streams would be diverted, and the original channel dewatered, if any instream work is needed. Stranded aquatic organisms would be captured and moved out of the construction zone. A native vegetation seed mix or native plants would be planted in disturbed (non-road) areas.

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 Biological Opinion (2020 USFWS 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 1021.102 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]

JACQUELYN SCHEI

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Jacquelyn Schei
Environmental Protection Specialist

Concur:

KATEY GRANGE

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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 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: Culvert Replacements and Road Sediment Reduction in the Salmon River Watershed

Project Site Description

The project area consists of Nez Perce Tribal Ceded Territory within the BNF and PNF in Valley County, Idaho. Proposed actions would take place along existing FS roadways and in riparian and wetland habitats. Project sites are above 6,000 feet in elevation and are surrounded by forested hillslopes. The BNF and PNF offer several recreational opportunities and have visitors year-round. The proposed culvert replacements in the PNF are in the Monument Creek watershed, approximately 45 miles east of McCall, Idaho, along Thunder Mountain Road (FS Road 50375). The sites are in a remote area of the forest bordering a wilderness area. The gravel road provides access to trailheads, a historic cabin, and a defunct mine in the area. Rice Creek Road (FS Road 478) in BNF is approximately 35 miles southeast of McCall. It sees little use, mainly due to being closed for several years, but is also only accessible to high clearance vehicles.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The FS assumed Lead Agency responsibilities for Section 106 review. In 2025, PNF staff determined that the proposed culvert replacements do not have the potential to affect historic properties and no consultations were completed. the Rice Creek project, BNF staff conducted a consultation in 2024, and made a determination of no historic properties affected. BPA has reviewed project documentation (BPA cultural resources numbers ID 2025 032 and ID 2025 033) and concurred with the PNF and BNF determinations.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Heavy equipment such as an excavator and dump truck would be utilized during proposed activities. Replacement culverts would be contained entirely within the non-native aggregate roadbed material and would be located within the footprint of the existing structure. Road improvements on Rice Creek Road would occur on the existing, recently repaired roadway. There would be minor, temporary impacts to soil from increased erosion potential during construction activities. Sediment control best management practices would be put in place prior to implementation to minimize potential for instream turbidity or excessive runoff during construction, such as pumping turbid water within the construction site away from the stream. Work areas would be isolated by rerouting water around the work area to minimize erosion and turbidity. Overall, short- to long-term sediment delivery would be reduced by replacing the culverts. Making improvements to Rice Creek road would also minimize sediment delivery into the creek.

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

Potential for Significance: No with Conditions

Explanation: The FS has assumed Lead Agency responsibilities for ESA and would exercise full ESA oversight of the actions within their authority. The FS would adhere to the USFWS Idaho Fish & Wildlife Office-Stream Crossing Replacement and Removal 2012 Programmatic (01EIFW00-2012-F-0015). The whitebark pine (*Pinus albicaulis*), ESA-listed as Threatened, has the potential to be in the project area and there is documented presence of the species and suitable habitat in the BNF and PNF. There is also suitable habitat in the project area for a few state special-status and Forest Watch species, but there are no known populations of these species in the project area. The proposed actions will have no effect to whitebark pine with adherence to avoidance and minimization measures listed in the BNF/PNF Forest Plan standards and guidelines and associated programmatic biological opinions designed to mitigate impacts to listed species. The equipment operations necessary for replacement of the culverts and road improvements would crush or destroy existing vegetation along the roadside and stream banks. These areas would be revegetated with native seed mixes and native plant material. Increased native vegetation would support improved habitat and help prevent streambank erosion in the long term.

Notes:

- Because whitebark pine and suitable habitat may be present in project areas, the FS would conduct surveys prior to implementing stream crossing activities. If project areas are occupied by whitebark pine, then ground-disturbing activities would not occur within a yet to be determined buffer distance, such that the actions would have no adverse impacts to individual plants.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The FS has assumed Lead Agency responsibilities for ESA and would exercise full ESA oversight of the actions within their authority. The FS would adhere to the USFWS Idaho Fish & Wildlife Office-Stream Crossing Replacement and Removal 2012 Programmatic (01EIFW00-2012-F-0015).

The Canada lynx (*Lynx canadensis*) and North American wolverine (*Gulo gulo luscus*), ESA-listed as Threatened, have the potential to be in the project area. There are no known recent occurrences of these two species in the project area. The monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*), ESA proposed Threatened, and Suckley's cuckoo bumble bee (*Bombus suckleyi*), ESA proposed Endangered, also have the potential to be present in the project area. No other state special-status species are known to be present in the project areas. The proposed actions would not be likely to adversely affect ESA-listed or proposed species with adherence to mitigation measures listed in the biological opinions and following BNF and PNF Forest Plan standards and guidelines designed to mitigate impacts to listed and non-listed wildlife species.

Proposed actions may deter wildlife from the area when work is occurring due to noise and human presence. These impacts would be minor and temporary in nature and conditions would return to normal when crews leave. Proposed actions would destroy the habitats of small animals, but would only temporarily displace medium-size or larger animals from their preferred habitats during construction and they would likely re-occupy the site once human activity has moved or ceased. 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 and human presence. However, the actions will have long-terms benefits to habitats.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The FS has assumed Lead Agency responsibilities for ESA and would exercise full ESA oversight of the actions within their authority. The FS would adhere to the USFWS Idaho Fish & Wildlife Office-Stream Crossing Replacement and Removal 2012 Programmatic (01EIFW00-2012-F-0015) and the NMFS Idaho Habitat Restoration Programmatic consultation (WCRO-2018-00002).

ESA-listed steelhead, Chinook salmon, and bull trout are present in the project area, as is their designated critical habitat. There are no other state special-status species known to be in the project areas. The conclusion from the ESA consultations was that proposed actions may adversely affect ESA-listed species but would not be likely to jeopardize the species or destroy or adversely modify critical habitats. Impacts would be minimized with adherence to mitigation measures listed in the biological opinions and following BNF and PNF Forest Plan standards and guidelines designed to mitigate impacts to listed and non-listed species.

Project actions would result in temporary negative impacts to fish and fish habitat, specifically sediment transport and delivery and displacement of individuals. Ground-disturbing activities would increase the risk of erosion and sedimentation during and immediately after proposed actions. This increase would be limited to the time of construction, primarily during the removal of the existing structures and the construction of the new structures and would not be expected to last more than two days. Stream habitat (100 feet or less) would be disturbed, but much of this had already been compromised by the existing roads and culverts. The disturbed areas would be reconstructed to provide better (and more) habitat.

Overall, the proposed actions would improve long-term conditions for fish because the potential for culvert blockage/failure and the associated sedimentation from that and vehicular use on forest roads would be reduced by replacing the culverts and improving roads so that sediment delivery to streams is reduced. Also, fish passage barriers would be removed with culvert replacements.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The project would not change the hydrology within the project area. No fill, excavation, or destruction of wetlands would occur.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No new wells or use of groundwater are proposed. There could be a potential for fuel or fluid drips or spills from the equipment used, but spills and drips with the volume necessary to contaminate groundwater is unlikely. The projects would require a Spill Containment Plan be completed before starting work.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The underlying land use would not change for any of the proposed project sites. The FS would require contractors for all proposed activities to produce a traffic control plan before construction. The FS would reduce road closures to the extent possible to allow for access by forest visitors and post alternate routes where possible. There would be impacts to visitors trying to access trailheads that are past the culvert sites as any road closures would restrict access. The FS would post notices about any upcoming closures for forest visitors and the closures would be temporary and of limited duration (likely less than one week to replace all culverts). Since the area is remote, it is not expected that there would be regular use of Thunder Mountain Road.

Rice Creek Road may be limited to one lane or have intermittent closures to facilitate repairs or equipment access. Since it is a primitive road that requires high clearance vehicles for access, it is expected that there would be minimal use and there would be minor impacts to forest visitors. Any upcoming closures would be posted by the FS and would be temporary in nature and limited in duration.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed work would have little effect on visual quality. The structural changes for culvert replacements would be made within the footprint of existing culverts and would not change the overall visual character of the landscape as seen from the roadways. The improvements to Rice Creek Road would show improved road conditions as compared to the previous washed out conditions.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be minor, temporary effects to the air quality of the environment from exhaust from equipment and vehicles used for the project. Normal conditions would return upon project completion. The effects would therefore be minor.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be some short-term noise impacts from the heavy equipment used for the project. 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: The proposed work is not considered hazardous, nor does it result in any new health or safety hazards or risks to the public. All personnel would use best management practices to protect workers' health and safety 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: All activities would occur in coordination with the BNF and PNF and on lands managed by the FS. The BNF and PNF publish a Schedule of Proposed Actions (available to the public) that have included the proposed actions. The FS has also discussed and sent details of proposed actions to Tribes, county commissions, agencies, and interested parties as part of the environmental evaluation efforts.

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

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