

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy



Proposed Action: Montana Projects - Hungry Horse Radio Station Removal and Fiber Installation Project (Update to Previous CX Completed November 17, 2021)

Project No.: P02326

Project Manager: Sarah Sprague – TEPS-TPP-1

Location: Flathead County, MT

Categorical Exclusion Applied (10 C.F.R. Part 1021): B3.2 Aviation Activities, B4.6 Additions and Modifications to Transmission Facilities, B4.7 Fiber Optic Cable, B4.10 Removal of Electric Transmission Facilities

Description of the Proposed Action: The Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) proposes to decommission and remove the Hungry Horse radio station and Teakettle Repeater and install two fiber optic cables on the Hungry Horse-Columbia Falls No. 1 transmission line to take their place. This CX has been updated to reflect the addition of a short fiber reroute outside of the existing Hungry Horse-Columbia Falls No. 1 transmission line right-of-way.

Work would take place at BPA's Hungry Horse Radio Station and along the Hungry Horse-Columbia Falls No. 1 transmission line corridor and along a small section of county road. Work would also take place at a small site to the northeast of Conkelley Substation called the Teakettle repeater site.

Hungry Horse Dam to Columbia Falls Substation Fiber Optic Communication Cable:

BPA proposes several modifications to its communication system to support operation and maintenance for the Hungry Horse Power House Communications Replacement Project in Flathead County, Montana. Major project components include the following:

- Demolition of the Hungry Horse radio site, including the removal of the microwave antenna, tower, and the radio station building. The footings and foundations would remain in place.
- Removal of the Teakettle passive repeater and its tower. Due to limited access to this remote location, the footings would be cut off and left in place, and the tower would be air lifted off the site by helicopter.
- Addition of fiber optic communication cable to the Hungry Horse - Columbia Falls No. 1 transmission line.
 - Total fiber optic length would be approximately 9 miles, starting at the Hungry Horse Dam and ending at BPA's Columbia Falls Substation.
 - The first 6 miles of cable would be strung mostly on existing structures. The final 3 miles, prior to Columbia Falls Substation on flat ground, would be buried underground. In 2025 BPA determined that an additional 0.4 mile of the fiber optic

line would be buried under an existing county road (Berne Road) on the south end of the project area. This option avoided increased costs due to substrate suitability and also avoided potential contamination associated with the former Beaver Woods Products site.

- Approximately 30 existing structures would require modification to support the new fiber optic cable.
- Approximately 8 new wood poles would be installed along the ROW to support the fiber optic cable where spans between existing towers are too long.
- No new access roads would be associated with these structures; they would be located in areas with easy drive-up access across the ground surface.
- Access roads and structure landings would undergo minor improvements (vegetation clearing, spot rock, limited grading) to allow equipment to access structures.

All proposed work except removal of the Teakettle Repeater and approximately 0.4 mile of buried fiber line would occur within or immediately adjacent to existing high voltage, electrical transmission facilities, or transmission line Rights-of-Ways (ROWs). The Teakettle Repeater is located in a remote area on a mountainside above the Flathead Valley. The Berne Road reroute county road section is located east of the ROW and north of the Columbia Falls Substation.

The Federal Columbia River Transmission System Act directs BPA to construct, acquire, operate, maintain, repair, relocate, and replace the transmission system, including facilities and structures appurtenant thereto. (16 United States Code [U.S.C] § 838i(b)). The Administrator is further charged with maintaining electrical stability and reliability, selling transmission and interconnection services, and providing service to BPA's customers. (16 U.S.C § 838b(b-d)). The Administrator is also authorized to conduct electrical research, development, experimentation, tests, and investigation related to construction, operation, and maintenance of transmission systems and facilities. (16 U.S.C § 838i(b)(3)).

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

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.

Douglas Corkran
Environmental Protection Specialist

Concur:

Katey C. Grange
NEPA Compliance Officer

Attachment(s): Environmental Checklist

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 Hungry Horse-Columbia Falls fiber line follows the South Fork Flathead River valley, crossing the river several times and traversing the side of the heavily forested valley above the river for long stretches before crossing flat agricultural and industrial lands and entering the Columbia Falls Substation. The Teakettle repeater is located on a heavily forested mountainside north of the Flathead Valley.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: BPA archaeologists consulted with the Montana State Historic Preservation Office and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho on the proposed project. BPA determined that the project would have an adverse effect on historic properties (the Hungry Horse-Conkelley No. 1 transmission line). BPA and the MT SHPO entered into a Memorandum of Agreement on March 27, 2021, which includes the cataloging of a historical records collection documenting the Pacific Northwest aluminum industry and various procedural tasks. On July 10, 2025, BPA archeologists determined that the Berne Road fiber reroute would have no potential to cause effect and no additional Section 106 consultation would be needed.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Ground disturbance associated with the proposed project would be limited to minor access road improvement, wood pole placement, and the below-ground installation of a fiber optic cable for three miles on flat ground. The potential for soils to migrate offsite is low, and all disturbed areas would be graded and reseeded following construction. Impacts to soils and geology would be low.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The only ESA-listed plant species listed as potentially occurring near the project area are Spalding's catchfly and whitebark pine. The Spalding's catchfly is not documented near the project area, nor does the project area contain suitable bunchgrass habitat for the species. The whitebark pine is generally only found at higher elevations than the project area, and only two trees, both Douglas-firs, would be removed as part of the proposed

project. Overall, very little vegetation would be removed as part of the proposed project and impacts to plants would be low.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: BPA consulted with USFWS on Canada lynx, grizzly bear, and yellow-billed cuckoo, and USFWS concurred with BPA's determination of not likely to adversely affect on May 10, 2021. Common wildlife species may be temporarily disturbed by construction activities; however, the potential for long-term impacts is low. To protect grizzly bears, USFWS requires that the contractor and BPA coordinate with them on helicopter use and fly-yard locations, that food storage guidelines and camping restrictions within portions of the project area be implemented, and that federal bald eagle management guidelines be followed near active nest sites.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Most of the proposed project is located in upland areas away from streams, rivers, and lakes. There are three areas where the project intersects the South Fork of the Flathead River. Work in these areas would take place in upland areas away from the river. One small closed-system lake and intermittent stream are located in the section of ROW where the fiber optic cable would be buried, and the fiber would be bored underneath these water features. No fish were identified in the lake or stream during fieldwork. No impacts to water bodies, floodplains, and fish are expected.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: One small wetland has been identified in the section of ROW where the fiber optic cable would be buried, and the fiber would be bored underneath it. No impacts to wetlands are expected.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Ground-disturbing work would occur within the Hungry Horse-Columbia Falls No. 1 transmission line ROW but is not expected to result in changes in hydrology or the release of sediment or hazardous materials that could affect groundwater or aquifers.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The project would not result in any land use changes, and no specially-designated areas would be affected by the proposed project. Approximately 0.4 mile of county road would temporarily be disturbed by the Berne Road fiber reroute. During construction the road would be partially closed which could affect local traffic patterns. BPA would implement measures such as flaggers to minimize traffic disruption during the short period of disturbance. No long term changes in access would result. The project would have low impacts to land uses.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Removal of the Hungry Horse Radio Station and the Teakettle repeater would reduce the amount of infrastructure visible to the public. This would slightly improve the visual quality of those areas. The addition of a fiber optic cable to the existing transmission line would slightly change the local appearance of the facility. In general, the addition of a small cable to the transmission line would not alter the overall appearance of the facility except where new wood poles would be located. Most of the area where the fiber optic cable would be added is located away from most viewers. Overall impacts to visual quality would be low.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Construction of the proposed project would release small amounts of fugitive dust and vehicle emissions. These releases would be small, temporary, and episodic, with no long-term impacts to air quality.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Construction of the proposed project would generate some noise from construction equipment, tool use, and helicopter use. Construction would be limited to normal daytime hours. No long-term increases in noise are anticipated from this project. Helicopter use would mostly occur in National Forest lands or rural areas that are well away from population centers. Overall noise impacts would be low.

12. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No hazardous materials would be used except for normal fuels and fluids related to construction equipment. Spill containment materials would be located at all active construction areas, and no hazardous conditions would be created by the proposed project. No impacts to human health and safety are expected. The Berne Road reroute was partially proposed to avoid any potential contamination associated with the former Beaver Wood Products 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: The purpose of the Berne Road reroute and this updated CX is to reroute the fiber cable around a property with a history of land use that may have resulted in subsurface contamination with hazardous substances to avoid a possible uncontrolled release of hazardous materials from construction activities.

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: Most of the project is located on Flathead National Forest lands. All underlying landowners would be notified of the proposed project.

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

Signed:

Douglas Corkran
Environmental Protection Specialist