Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy

Proposed Action: West Branch Rattlesnake Creek Fish Habitat Restoration - Project Areas 1-2

Project No.: 1994-018-05

Project Manager: Jennifer Lord – EWU - 4

Location: Asotin County, Washington

Categorical Exclusion Applied (from 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 Asotin County Conservation District (District) to increase instream habitat complexity and riparian function in Project Areas 1 and 2 of West Branch Rattlesnake Creek by installing instream structures to promote pool formation and floodplain inundation and by improving riparian vegetative conditions. These actions would improve watershed conditions and aquatic habitat and increase rearing capacity and holding capacity for Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*).

The project would occur along approximately 0.7 river miles of West Branch Rattlesnake Creek. The District would employ low-tech process-based restoration strategies to install simple, hand-built wood structures in the creek, including Beaver Dam Analogs (BDAs), Post-Assisted Log Structures (PALS), and post vane structures. The District would also reconfigure instream boulders to increase channel complexity. Approximately four BDA structures would be installed in the stream bed by scouring the channel using hand-tools and buckets for substrate to build layers between 6 inches and 12 inches deep. Fine woody debris and additional sediment would be woven between each layer. Between 4 and 25 untreated wooden posts would be inserted throughout the structure and driven 2 to 3 feet into the stream bed using a hand-held pneumatic post-pounder. Posts would be cut horizontally to the same elevation. The structures would vary in size based on their locations and intended benefits. The amount of fill used in all BDA structures would be less than 0.25 cubic yards per structure of woody debris, rocks, gravel, and sediments.

PALS would consist of untreated wooden posts, less than four inches in diameter, driven into the substrate with a hand-held pneumatic post-pounder. Woody material of various sizes would be woven by hand between the posts to mimic natural wood accumulations. PALS installation would occur within the 100-year floodplain. Approximately 4 to 15 posts would be used per structure depending on the width of the stream at the installation location and the type of structure needed. Types of structures installed would include bank-attached PALS (about 27), debris jam PALS (about 20), mid-channel PALS (about nine), and channel spanning PALS (about eight).

Approximately 17 post vane structures would be installed. These structures would be similar to PALS, with untreated wooden posts driven into the stream, but would not have woody material woven between the posts. In addition, posts would be driven into the stream at an acute angle of around 18 degrees.

Boulder reconfiguration structures (about six) would be comprised of small boulders and rocks from the stream and adjacent floodplain. Materials would be manipulated by hand and using basic hand tools to reincorporate them into the stream in a natural configuration to increase complexity within the stream and promote recovery of fish habitat. The number of rocks manipulated in each boulder structure would vary, but the overall amount of rock would be less than 2.4 cubic yards for all boulder structures combined.

Equipment to be used includes chainsaws, hand-held pneumatic post-pounder, sledgehammers, handsaws, shovels, drills, pry bar, come along, grip hoist, winch, and buckets. An ATV would be used for staging materials, equipment, and crew on site. The woody materials needed for the PALS and BDA structures would be sourced from forest health and fuel reduction projects within Asotin County whenever possible or otherwise sourced from the region (*e.g.,* local logging operations). Access to the project area would be on established roads and an established dirt access lane maintained by the property owners. Staging areas and the access lane may be cleared of dry, dead, standing weeds or vegetation using mowers or brush cutters to mitigate fire risks. No soil disturbance or scalping would occur during vegetation management. The timing of instream construction activities would be within the designated in-water work window and surface water is expected to be intermittent or at very low flow. Any disturbed area would be seeded with a native grass mix after construction.

The District would monitor effectiveness of the structures for 10 years following construction. If there are adverse impacts to the stream or floodplain or if structures are not working as planned, the District would remove, modify, or add structures according to the written adaptive management plan.

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 BPA's 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. (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]

JACQUELYN SCHEI

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Jacquelyn Schei
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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.

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Project Site Description

The West Fork of Rattlesnake Creek is a tributary to Rattlesnake Creek, which is a tributary to the Grand Ronde River. The project area is in a relatively remote area of southeastern Washington, approximately 32 miles south of Asotin, Washington. The surrounding land is currently managed for livestock rangeland use, timber production, recreation (U.S. Forest Service land and Fields Spring State Park are nearby), and wildlife habitat including mule deer, elk, bighorn sheep, and upland game birds. The project area lies solely within private property used for ranching. This site has been under contract with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Conservation Riparian Easement Program for several years, and recent projects have included riparian buffer fencing, fish passage improvements, noxious weed control, and extensive riparian planting. Rattlesnake Creek Road confines one side of the creek in the project area. The road and its associated fords, a culvert, and remnant levees are the primary anthropogenic features in the reach. There is limited riparian establishment in the project area, and it consists primarily of deciduous trees and shrubs. The riparian vegetation has matured but overall, the site still lacks large woody debris needed to encourage natural stream processes and provide salmonid habitat.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: BPA initiated consultation on April 1, 2025, with the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Nation, the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation, the Nez Perce Tribe, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, and the Washington Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation (DAHP) (BPA Cultural Resources Project No.: WA 2025 056). On June 2, 2025, BPA made a determination of no historic properties affected. June 2, 2025, BPA received concurrence from DAHP. No other consulting parties responded within the 30-day consultation period.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The installation of the wood structures would temporarily disturb soils when posts are pounded into the streambed. Best management practices would be followed to avoid or minimize temporary fine sediment impacts during construction. Ground disturbance from access and staging would be minimal and disturbed areas would be seeded with native grasses after construction.

Streambed material would be disturbed during BDA construction, but the amount of material moved would not exceed 0.25 cubic yards of fill per structure. No fill would be removed during installation. Boulder structures would manipulate less than 2.4 cubic yards of native stream or floodplain materials for all structures proposed. No fill or rock material would be removed during installation.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No ESA-listed or state special-status plant species are known to exist in the project area. There may be some cutting or mowing of vegetation for the staging area and dirt access road, but no plants would be uprooted and removed. There would be trampling of vegetation as crews access the site, but this would be minor and temporary. Areas that are disturbed by construction activities would be reseeded with a native grass seed mix.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No ESA-listed or state-listed wildlife species are known to exist within the proposed project area. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Information for Planning and Consultation (IPaC) site, the monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*), ESA-proposed Threatened, and Suckley's cuckoo bumble bee (*Bombus suckleyi*), ESA-proposed Endangered, have the potential to be present in the project area, but there is no designated critical habitat nor confirmed presence for either species. Because the project location is in an area used for cattle operations, the types of plants needed for survival of these two species are unlikely to be found in the project area. IPaC also lists the North American wolverine (*Gulo gulo luscus*) and the yellow-billed cuckoo (*Coccyzus amerianus*), both listed as ESA-Threatened, as having the potential to be in the area. However, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) information shows that wolverine populations in Washington are limited to the Cascade Range and northeastern Washington and not near the project area. WDFW information indicates the yellow-billed cuckoo is functionally extirpated from the state. Therefore, no ESA-list or proposed listed species would be in or near the project area and the project would have no impact on these species. No other ESA-listed or state special-status wildlife species are known to exist in the project area.

Wildlife may be temporarily disturbed by crews accessing sites during daylight hours and from the noise of the hand-held pneumatic post-pounder; however, the project area is adjacent to cattle ranching operations and the noise from the crew would not be louder than typical ambient noise in the area. It is expected that wildlife would return to the area after construction is complete and there would be no long-term displacement of wildlife. Some aquatic invertebrates or amphibians may be displaced or killed during installation of instream structures, but rapid reoccupation of these areas by the same or other members of the same classes of animals following the project would be likely. The structures and the habitat they are designed to create would increase habitat for these species over the long term.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Federally-listed Snake River steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) and their critical habitat are present in the project area. According to IPaC, bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) have the potential to be in the project area, but no critical habitat is present in the area. The nearest confirmed presence of bull trout, per the StreamNet database, is over two miles downstream in the Grand Ronde River. Therefore, the project would have no impact on bull trout. There are no other ESA-listed or state special-status species in the project area.

Project work would occur in low to no flow conditions along the creek. If there are high enough flows to support fish presence, project activities would temporarily disturb nearby fish due to crew presence in the stream. It is expected that fish would avoid the area when crews are present but would reoccupy the area immediately after crews leave. Water

quality may decrease temporarily due to sediments disturbed during the installation of posts, but turbidity would be monitored during implementation. Impacts would be minimized by following BPA's Habitat Improvement Program requirements and conservation measures. The project would obtain a Nationwide 27 (Aquatic Habitat Restoration, Enhancement, and Establishment Activities) permit under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act and a Washington Hydraulic Project Approval prior to the start of any work and comply with all terms and conditions outlined in the permit and approval. In the long term, this project would increase fish habitat complexity and floodplain connection.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: According to the National Wetlands Inventory, there are no wetlands in the project area. Therefore, the project would have no impact to wetlands.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No new wells or use of groundwater are proposed. The proposed project would have no impact to groundwater or aquifers.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The project is located on private property. The underlying land use, cattle ranching, would not change and no impact to specially-designated areas would occur as a result of this project. The project would be consistent with the terms and conditions outlined in the Conservation Riparian Easement Program and the underlying property would remain eligible for participation in the program..

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed work would have minor impacts to visual quality. The project is located in a relatively remote area and is not likely to be seen from public roads. The new wood structures would be visually consistent with adjacent vegetation.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be minor, temporary effects to air quality from exhaust due to vehicle use for site access. 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, occur during daylight hours, and cease following project completion. The project area is adjacent to cattle ranching operations and the noise from the crew would not be louder than typical ambient noise in the area.

12. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Use of equipment, such as a hand-held pneumatic post-pounder, would have some known risks that could be mitigated with best management practices. All personnel would use best management practices to protect worker health and safety. The proposed work is not considered hazardous, nor does it result in any health or safety risks to the general public.

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 District has an agreement in place with the private landowners to access the properties to perform the proposed work and to monitor for up to 10 years.

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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