

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy



Proposed Action: Sunnyside Wildlife Area Yakima River Shore Planting

Project No.: 2002-014-00

Project Manager: Jennifer Plemons, EWM-4

Location: Yakima, Washington

Categorical Exclusion Applied (from 10 C.F.R. Part 1021): B1.20 Protection of cultural resources, fish and wildlife

Description of the Proposed Action: Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) proposes to fund the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) to plant tree saplings on roughly one acre of floodplain near the confluence of Snipe's Creek and the Yakima River in Yakima County, Washington. Funding the proposed action would support conservation of Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed species considered in the 2020 ESA consultations with both the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) on the operations and maintenance of the Columbia River System, while also supporting ongoing efforts to mitigate the effects of the FCRPS 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.*).

The Sunnyside Wildlife Area is a state-operated wildlife and recreation complex which runs along the banks of the Yakima River in central Yakima County. WDFW staff from Sunnyside would plant up to 750 tree saplings in a fallow agricultural field on the bank of Snipe's Creek just upstream from its confluence with the Yakima River. This area of the floodplain has been experiencing a great deal of erosion due to the removal of much of the complex vegetation in the area for agriculture and ranching in the 19th and 20th centuries, and re-establishing riparian woody species would help to slow and reverse this erosion.

Potted saplings would be acquired from a local nursery. Up to 250 each of cottonwood (*Populus trichocarpa*), Pacific willow (*Salix lasiandra*), and western serviceberry (*Amelanchier alnifolia*) would be planted. WDFW staff would use small augers and hand tools to dig individual holes for each sapling. The trees would then be placed in the holes and mulched, fertilized, and watered regularly. The new plantings would be monitored and any weeds or competing vegetation removed until the trees are firmly established. All planting would be completed in the late autumn of 2025 through the early winter of 2026, subject to the availability of nursery trees.

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

Thomas DeLorenzo
Environmental Policy Analyst

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 Sunnyside Wildlife Area consists of more than a dozen separate units comprising roughly 21,400 acres across Franklin, Benton, and Yakima Counties in south-central Washington owned and maintained by WDFW. In Yakima County, the Sunnyside units straddle the course of the Yakima River as it flows eastward towards its confluence with the Columbia River. WDFW maintains dozens of miles of hiking, hunting, and sporting trails throughout these units, along with visitor facilities, parking lots, and boat launches. Portions of the wildlife area units are inaccessible to visitors, providing secluded habitat for resident and migratory wildlife, especially wintering migratory waterfowl like Canada goose (*Branta canadensis*).

The Yakima River basin has been heavily affected by historical and modern agriculture. While the region has hosted human habitation since time immemorial thanks to the abundant salmon fisheries, relatively mild climate, and extensive hunting opportunities in the local highlands, westward settlement in the late 19th century brought with it heavy anthropogenic modification to the basin as streams were channelized for irrigation, plains were leveled for planting, and cattle grazed the local shrublands. These effects severely degraded much of the riparian region of the river, causing erosion issues as banks are no longer stabilized with tree and shrub roots and stormwater runs freely across bare croplands.

The proposed planting area is a fallow agricultural field that was leveled and used for intensive farming since at least the 1940s until its incorporation into the Sunnyside complex. The vegetation in the area was removed for this cropland and the proposed actions would seek to restore this segment of the riparian corridor of Snipe's Creek to a more historically natural state.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: A BPA archaeologist reviewed the proposed actions and determined that there would be no historic properties affected by the proposed planting. BPA initiated consultation with the Washington State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and the Yakima Tribe on August 27, 2025. SHPO concurred with BPA's determination on August 28. No other responses were received. The 30-day consultation period ended on September 25.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Small augers and hand tools would be used to dig the holes for each tree individually. The holes would be no larger than required for each sapling, roughly 6 to 8 inches deep, and soil excavated would be backfilled to secure the planted tree. This method of planting would reduce the ground disturbance to the minimum amount necessary to plant the trees. Other disruptions to local geology would be limited to temporary disturbance of the topmost layer of soil from staff and machinery. Overall effects would be mild.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There are no ESA-listed plant species located at the proposed planting site (USFWS Information for Planning and Consultation (IPaC)) and there would be no effect on ESA-listed plant species.

Washington state endangered Kellogg's dwarf rush (*Juncus kelloggii*) may be present in Yakima County (Washington Department of Natural Resources). No populations of Kellogg's rush have been observed in the Sunnyside units. Moreover, the intensive agricultural use of the proposed planting site likely would have removed any Kellogg's rush that was present in the past. As it would be extremely unlikely for Kellogg's rush to be found in the project area, there would be no effect on Kellogg's dwarf rush.

Individual grasses and forbs growing in locations in which trees are planted would be removed. While this would have effects on these individual plants, the long-term overall effects of the project would restore historical woody vegetation to the area and improve conditions for local plant species.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: ESA-listed yellow-billed cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*) has been documented in Yakima County (USFWS IPaC). Cuckoo generally prefers to nest and hunt in dense riparian woodlands and thickets. It is unlikely that any cuckoo would be nesting in the agricultural field where planting is proposed. The long-term effects of the project would be to restore historical riparian vegetation to the area, potentially creating additional habitat for cuckoo.

Washington state endangered ferruginous hawk (*Buteo regalis*) and greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) are present and regularly monitored on Sunnyside wildlife units. The monitored populations of these birds are confined to the upland units of the wildlife area closer to the nearby Rattlesnake Hills and are not typically found in the lower Yakima River valley where the planting is proposed. As it would be unlikely that either bird would be found in the project area, there would be no effects on these species.

Non-listed wildlife would be temporarily disturbed by noise and human presence during planting. These effects would be mild and would not cause any long-term harmful impacts to local wildlife. Restoring riparian vegetation in the area would improve habitat for local wildlife species in the long term.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: ESA-listed Chinook salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*) and bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*), along with bull trout designated critical habitat, are present in the Yakima River, which is close to the proposed planting site (USFWS IPaC, StreamNet Mapper). These fish would potentially swim into Snipe's Creek, which runs adjacent to the planting site. No proposed actions would take place in the river or involve any direct interaction with these fish. Short-term effects on fish would be mild, limited to temporary disturbance from noise and human presence during planting, consistent with the determination of BPA's Habitat Improvement Program (HIP4) programmatic ESA Section 7 consultation with NMFS and USFWS. The long-term effects would be beneficial by restoring the local vegetation and reducing the erosion into the river.

Effects on non-ESA-listed fish would be functionally identical to those on listed species.

No actions are proposed which would take place in the channel of Snipe's Creek, and effects on local water quality would therefore be negligible.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There are no mapped wetlands on the proposed planting site (USFWS National Wetlands Inventory). There would be no effect on wetlands.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No new wells or groundwater use are proposed. There would be no effect on groundwater and aquifers.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No changes to ownership or use of the area are proposed. The proposed project area has not been cultivated for agriculture since being incorporated into the Sunnyside complex. Planting would not require closure of public roadways nor impact the public use of the wildlife area.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed planting would replace fallow cropland with a more historically natural forested riparian corridor. The planting would help restore the historical visual conditions which existed before the area was modified for agriculture.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Equipment used for transport and planting would generate exhaust, but these effects would be temporary and localized, and therefore minor.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Equipment used for transport and planting would generate noise, but these effects would be temporary and localized, and therefore minor.

12. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: All personnel would use best practices to ensure human health and safety. All equipment would be operated solely by trained and licensed (when applicable) personnel.

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: WDFW owns and maintains the Sunnyside wildlife management units. WDFW would coordinate with any neighboring landowners, if necessary.

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

Signed:

Thomas DeLorenzo
Environmental Policy Analyst