

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy



Proposed Action: Sagebrush Flat Wildlife Area (Operations, Maintenance and Weir Repair)

Project No.: 1994-044-00

Project Manager: Jennifer Plemons EWM-4

Location: Douglas County, WA

Categorical Exclusion Applied (from 10 C.F.R. Part 1021): B1.20 Protection of Cultural Resources, Fish and Wildlife Habitat; B1.30 Routine Maintenance; B 1.11 Fencing; B 1.15 Support Buildings

Description of the Proposed Action: Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) proposes to fund the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) to conduct operations and maintenance (O&M) activities at the Sagebrush Flat Wildlife Area (SFWA) in north central Washington.

Specific Actions for O&M include:

- **General Maintenance:** Maintain facilities, support buildings, parking areas, grounds, and structures to structural integrity and proper working order. Includes sign maintenance, equipment repair and maintenance, vehicle maintenance, insect control and debris removal.
- **Fence Maintenance:** Maintain existing wildlife boundary fences and gates by repairing breaks, stretching loose wires, replacing wooden stays or "t" posts, repairing anchor structures, tightening wire, cutting and removing downed trees, etc., as necessary to maintain fence in functional condition.
- **Road, Trail and Parking Maintenance:** Annual road and trail maintenance would occur in addition to maintenance of public parking areas. Pit run rock would be spread on the existing road prisms (as needed) and parking areas to stabilize and maintain vehicle access for wildlife area staff. No disturbance would extend in width or depth beyond the original road or trail prism footprint.
- **Vegetation Removal:** A long-term integrated pest management program would integrate the following control techniques: biological (introducing bio-agents that control weeds), chemical (applying herbicides), cultural (burning or grazing) and mechanical (physically removing weeds). Burning would be confined to individual plants (Russian thistle) or small plants gathered into small piles. Burned remains would be hosed down by a water truck. The specific combination used would be tailored to the weed species, site, topography, and management goals.
- **Vegetation Maintenance:** A mixture of native grasses and forbs would be seeded in discrete locations throughout the SFWA. Seeding would be done via rubber-tired grass seeders that would create a furrow, into which seed would be deposited, then covered by a trailing packer wheel that closes the furrow. The seeding depth for native grasses and forbs would be no more 3/8 of an inch and would occur in former agriculture fields. Potted trees and shrubs, in one-gallon containers, would be planted by hand.

- **Terrestrial habitat features:** Structures that mimic natural features and provide support for wildlife foraging, breeding, or resting/refuge would be installed. Such structures would include nest boxes/platforms, avian perches, snags, guzzlers, and artificial roosting sites.
- **Weir Repair:** In West Foster Creek, rock weirs that were damaged by a 2019 spring runoff event would be repaired through the placement of additional rock. These rock weirs would maintain a plunge pool and slow the water velocity downstream to protect an existing ford crossing. The rock placement would extend to a maximum of three feet beyond bankfull width, be 24 – 36 inches in size and 50% embedded into the streambed. After placement of rock, the oversteepened streambank would be sloped to a maximum of 33 degrees and planted with grass and shrubs.

These actions would contribute to efforts to mitigate for 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. (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

Daniel Antonio Gambetta
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.

Proposed Action: Sagebrush Flat Wildlife Area (Operations, Maintenance and Weir Repair)

Project Site Description

The Sagebrush Flats Wildlife Area (SFWA) encompasses 21,000 acres in central Washington's Columbia Plateau Ecoregion, 15 miles west of Ephrata. Four separate units comprise the wildlife area: Sagebrush Flat, Dormaier, Chester Butte and Bridgeport. Managed by WDFW, the site was established to conserve shrub-steppe (low rainfall natural grassland) habitat and support recovery of imperiled species such as the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit and greater sage-grouse. BPA funds operations and maintenance (O&M) activities to assist WDFW in habitat management, species protection, and site upkeep. Public access is very limited.

The SFWA consists of rolling loess soils, glacial outwash, basalt outcrops, and shrub-steppe vegetation (big sagebrush, Sandberg bluegrass and bluebunch wheatgrass). Invasive species (cheatgrass and knapweed) occur in patches throughout the SFWA. Soils are generally stable but erosion-prone when vegetation is sparse. Year-round and seasonal streams as well as springs occur on the Bridgeport Unit. Most streams are dry for up to 5 months each year.

The SFWA is comprised of restored grasslands, Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) fields, limited cropland, gravel access roads, and fencing. It supports mule deer, sharp-tailed grouse, burrowing owls, reptiles, songbirds, and many shrub-steppe obligates. Surrounding land uses include wheat farming, CRP fields, orchards, and cattle grazing.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Pursuant to its responsibilities under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, BPA consulted numerous times with the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation (CCT) and Washington Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation (DAHP) (BPA CR No#. 2015-111, 2017-103, 2021-155 and 2022-029) for Operations and Maintenance activities of road maintenance (2015-111), building maintenance (2017-103), fence maintenance (2015-111), upland shrub habitat improvement, and plant and seed vegetation (2021-155 and 2022-029). Upon each instance BPA made a determination that the proposed actions would result in no historic properties affected.

More recently, on September 23, 2024 (BPA CR Project No# WA 2024-093) BPA initiated consultation with DAHP and CCT for weir repair and debris removal. DAHP and CCT concurred with BPA's delineation of the APE and the proposed project activities. On March 25th, 2025, BPA made a determination that the these actions would result in no historic properties affected. DAHP concurred with BPA's determination that the implementation of the weir repair and debris removal would result in no adverse effect to historic properties (March 26th, 2025). BPA did not receive any responses from CCT.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No with Conditions

Explanation: Vegetative Management actions such as hand-pulling, mowing, or applying herbicides for the control of invasive plants would cause no or minimal disturbance to soils. Vegetative planting that would be done by seeding truck or done by hand would cause minimal disturbance to soils. Ground disturbance associated with fence management actions would be minimal to nonexistent as all work would be done by hand using materials on-site and on previously disturbed areas. For weir repair and road work, minor disturbance may result from equipment, bank sloping, and fill compaction. Erosion control measures would be utilized to minimize soil movement from the work site.

Notes:

- Implement sediment and erosion control best management practices (BMPs) immediately after clearing and prior to initiating ground-disturbing activities to prevent erosion and runoff.
- Native seed mix, vegetation plugs, shrubs, and/or slash shall be placed on the disturbed soil to assist in the reestablishment of native vegetation.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No federal or special status plant species occur throughout the wildlife area. Vegetative management that utilizes herbicide applications would utilize Best Management Practices (BMPs) to minimize drift or runoff to non-target vegetation. Plant disturbance associated with fence management actions would be minimal to nonexistent as all work would be done by hand using materials on-site and at previously disturbed areas. The project area associated with the weir repair does not contain vegetation due to previous wildfires. O&M activities would be restricted to avoid intact native plant communities unless site restoration activities (shrub planting or invasive species removal) are specifically prescribed. Overall, vegetative management activities would result in minor beneficial impacts due to the reduction of invasive species and an increase in native vegetation.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The SFWA provides habitat for numerous wildlife species, most being shrub-steppe obligates or grassland-dependent species. The site is also part of broader landscape-level conservation initiatives coordinated by WDFW, BPA, and other partners to conserve critical shrub-steppe habitats across the Columbia Basin used by several ESA-listed and state-listed species.

Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit (*Brachylagus idahoensis*, Federally Endangered): Reintroduction efforts are ongoing throughout the SFWA. O&M work would be coordinated with WDFW to avoid disturbance during breeding and burrow establishment. Herbicides would not be used in suitable or occupied habitats. Effects would be consistent with BPA's programmatic Habitat Improvement Program (HIP4) Section 7 consultation with USFWS, Not Likely to Adversely Effect determination.

Greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*, State Threatened) & Sharp-tailed grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus*, State Threatened): Distribution is extremely limited throughout the SFWA. If leks occur near any project areas, seasonal timing restrictions and buffers would be applied to avoid disturbance during breeding and nesting.

Washington state priority species found in the SFWA include bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), merlin (*Falco columbarius*), peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*), prairie falcon (*Falco mexicanus*), northern goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*), California quail (*Callipepla californica*), Lewis woodpecker (*Melanerpes lewis*), loggerhead shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*), California desert bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis nelsoni*) and Rocky Mountain mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus hemionus*). All human

presence and activity associated with these actions could cause temporary, short-term disturbance, and displacement. Due to the wide expanse of SFWA, it is unlikely that long-term displacement would result in competition for nearby habitats. The operation of vehicles and equipment associated with these project actions are planned to take place after migratory birds have completed nesting and fledging (mid/late summer). Vegetative management herbicide treatments would be small spot treatments of individuals or clusters of target plants that would be highly localized and thus not substantially impact any one animal's home range.

Overall, the SFWA O&M activities would benefit these species due to the reduction of invasive species, the expansion and enhancement of native plant assemblages, and the placement of terrestrial habitat features throughout the SFWA.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Existing water features are limited and primarily consist of springs or intermittent drainages. Vegetative management that utilizes herbicide applications shall utilize BMPs that would avoid these water features. Weir repair work that would occur in Middle Foster Creek would be completely in the dry. No federal or special status aquatic species or habitat are present throughout SFWA. Road and parking lot maintenance would not result in an overall increase in impervious surfaces that would result in additional discharge to water bodies and floodplain.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: O&M activities would occur within previously disturbed or managed areas, such as existing fences, trails, or weed treatment zones and avoid wetlands. These actions are not expected to alter surface hydrology, introduce fill material, or involve construction that could affect floodwater conveyance or storage into adjacent wetlands.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be no impact to groundwater or aquifers.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The project aligns with existing land use objectives consistent with WDFW Sagebrush Flat Wildlife Area Plan.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No visually prominent vegetative, landform, or structural change would be made. Herbicide treatment of small plant clusters may produce unsightly dead plants visible in the foreground in some areas for a season but would not substantially alter the visual quality in the long term.

Maintenance or repair activities would not change the visual character of the landscape along, or as seen from, county roadway.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Minor and temporary emissions from construction equipment, vehicles and powered hand tools are expected but would be short-lived. No long-term air quality impacts would occur.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be some short-term noise impacts from vehicles accessing the site, the heavy equipment used for excavation, and powered hand tools, but this type of noise is not inconsistent with that of common ranching and farming operations in the local area. All noise sources are of low intensity and short-term.

12. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Vehicle and working with hand and power tools have their attendant risks to equipment operators, but there would be no condition created from this action that would introduce new human health or safety hazards or risk into the environment. There are no known hazardous materials in the project area and no condition created by this action would increase the burden on the local health, safety, and emergency-response infrastructure.

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: NA

Require siting and construction or major expansion of waste storage, disposal, recovery, or treatment facilities (including incinerators) that are not otherwise categorically excluded.

Explanation: NA

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: NA

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: NA

Landowner Notification, Involvement, or Coordination

Description: Proposed activities would occur on lands owned and managed by WDFW. Citizens Advisory Group meetings are held to review WDFW management progress, performance measures and accomplishments on an annual basis.

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

Signed:

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