

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy



Proposed Action: Mainstem Forrest Conservation Area Juniper Removal

Project No.: 2007-397-00

Project Manager: Allan Whiting, EWL-4

Location: Grant County, Oregon

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 Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon (CTWS) to remove western juniper (*Juniperus occidentalis*) from approximately 90 acres of land in Grant County, Oregon. The land is part of the CTWS-owned Mainstem Forrest Conservation Area.

With the suppression of fire across the landscape, western juniper encroachment into sagebrush steppe, grassland, and riparian plant communities has disrupted the native plant communities and hydrologic cycle in these environments. Juniper dominance alters the ability of the soil to capture, store, and release water. Research indicates that removal of juniper can reduce surface runoff, soil erosion, and sediment delivery to streams. It can also improve groundwater recharge, leading to increased cool-water summer base flow to streams that benefit fish and other aquatic life.

The proposed project would remove juniper using mechanical methods. Equipment would include a tracked feller-buncher equipped with a bar saw for tree cutting and piling. Stumps would be left in place. A medium-sized excavator would be used for plucking and piling small juniper (less than 4 inches diameter). A tracked skid steer may also be used for piling cut trees. The piled trees would be left in place at the completion of this project. The CTWS may eventually burn the piles as part of ongoing juniper maintenance operations at CTWS properties. Cut juniper is typically seasoned one to three years before burning. BPA is currently not proposing to fund burning of the piles as part of this action.

These actions would support conservation of ESA-listed species considered in the 2020 Endangered Species Act (ESA) consultations with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) on the operation and maintenance of the Columbia River System. These actions also support ongoing 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

John Vlastelicia
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: Mainstem Forrest Conservation Area Juniper Removal

Project Site Description

The proposed juniper removal area encompasses approximately 90 acres of the northern part of CTWS's 3,445-acre Mainstem Forrest Conservation Area property, which is located just east of Prairie City in Grant County, Oregon. CTWS manages a conservation grazing program on the property, which also offers the McHaley Pond picnic area for visitors as well as hiking and deer and elk hunting opportunities by permit. The John Day River flows in a westerly direction through the southern part of the property. U.S. Highway 26 also transects the southern part of the property, and the valley bottom between the river and highway is irrigated and used for cattle grazing. The terrain slopes upward north of the highway, and the northern portions of the property contain hilly grasslands and areas of trees of varying densities, with the highest density of western juniper in the proposed 90-acre project area. A gravel road provides vehicle and equipment access to the project area from Highway 26, which is about 2 miles south of where trees would be removed.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: BPA initiated consultation with CTWS, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR), Burns-Paiute Tribe, and Oregon State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) for the project on October 12, 2021, as part of a Section 106 National Historic Preservation Act consultation process (BPA CR Project No. OR 2022 005). SHPO acknowledged receipt of the consultation package on November 30, 2021 (SHPO Case No. 21-1503). On November 8, 2022, BPA determined that the undertaking would result in no historic properties affected and submitted a supporting cultural resources inventory report to the consulting parties with the determination letter. CTUIR responded to the determination letter on November 23, 2022, to state that they had no concerns or comments on the project. The 30-day comment period closed on December 8, 2022, with no other comments received from consulting parties.

Notes:

- Previously recorded resources identified in the cultural resources inventory report would be avoided by all project activities. These resources are located within an area of low juniper density where no juniper removal or other ground disturbing work is proposed.
- Protocols would be in place requiring that, if cultural material is inadvertently encountered during the implementation of the project, work would be halted in the vicinity of the finds until they can be inspected and assessed by BPA in consultation with the appropriate consulting parties.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be temporary soil disturbance from juniper felling, hauling, and piling of cut trees on the site. The stumps of cut trees would not be removed, and no other excavation is proposed. Tracked equipment would be used to minimize soil disturbance

and compaction (compared to tires). An existing gravel road would be used for vehicle and equipment access to the juniper removal area from Highway 26.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Nuisance western juniper trees are the only vegetation targeted for removal by this project. Some incidental disturbance of other vegetation – primarily groundcover species – is expected because of equipment operation for cutting, hauling, and piling juniper trees.

The site is not within the geographic range of any plant species listed as Threatened or Endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). There are no documented occurrences of State of Oregon-listed Threatened or Endangered plants in the project area.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Wildlife including deer, elk, coyote, various small mammals, and birds may use the project area. Juniper removal activity could temporarily deter wildlife from using the project area, due to ground disturbance, visual disturbance, and noise from equipment operation and human activity. Additionally, juniper trees provide habitat structure for birds and small mammals; that type of habitat structure would be reduced with the trees removed.

Impacts to nesting birds would be avoided by performing the tree removal in the fall/winter period, outside of the nesting season. Work is expected to take approximately four to eight weeks to complete, beginning no sooner than October 2025 and ending no later than January 2026.

The North American wolverine (*Gulo gulo luscus*) is the only federal ESA-listed (Threatened) wildlife species with a geographic range that overlaps the project area. The wolverine is also an Oregon state-listed Threatened species. There have been very few verified wolverine sightings in Oregon and none in the project area, with the closest known wolverine activity being in the Wallowa Mountains of northeastern Oregon. The project area is at an elevation of approximately 4,000 feet and does not provide the deep, persistent spring snowpack that is typical suitable habitat for wolverine denning. While wolverines may travel long distances over a variety of terrain between suitable habitats, their extremely limited numbers in Oregon and lack of previous activity in the project area make it extremely unlikely they would be encountered during the proposed geotechnical investigation. The project would therefore have no effect on North American wolverine.

There are no documented occurrences of other state-listed Threatened or Endangered wildlife species in the project area.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There are no perennial streams or mapped floodplains within the proposed juniper removal area. Drainageways with ephemeral or intermittent flow convey surface runoff from the majority of the project area westward to Dixie Creek, which is located about 0.7 miles west of the project. Dixie Creek flows into the John Day River about 2.5 miles southwest of the project. The far eastern portion of the juniper removal area drains eastward to Slaughterhouse Gulch, which flows into the John Day River about 2 miles south of the project.

Dixie Creek is designated critical habitat for federal ESA-listed Mid-Columbia River (MCR) steelhead trout and is also mapped for use by Chinook salmon and redband trout. Slaughterhouse Gulch is mapped habitat for redband trout. The John Day River south of the project area is designated critical habitat for ESA-listed MCR steelhead trout and bull trout, and it is also used by Chinook salmon and redband trout.

The proposed project would not involve in-water work or vegetation removal adjacent to fish-bearing waterways or other perennial streams, and it would not otherwise cause changes in water quality, hydrology, or instream or riparian habitat conditions that would adversely affect ESA-listed fish and critical habitat, or non-listed fish. By removing juniper trees that consume a substantial amount of water, the project may improve groundwater recharge and summer streamflow conditions. Such actions may benefit ESA-listed and non-listed fish in waters downstream of the project, especially in conjunction with similar juniper removal activities occurring in the Upper John Day basin.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: National Wetland Inventory mapping identifies no wetlands in the proposed juniper removal area. There would be no fill placement, excavation, or other ground disturbance in wetlands as part of the juniper removal project.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed juniper removal would not involve groundwater withdrawals or discharges to groundwater. Juniper trees uptake a considerable amount of water from the soil (more than native bunch grasses) and reducing the number of juniper trees is expected to increase the amount of water available for groundwater recharge in the project area. The project site is not within a Groundwater Restricted Area designated by the Oregon Water Resources Department or within a Sole Source Aquifer designated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The juniper removal would occur on land owned and managed by CTWS. The juniper removal activity may temporarily restrict public access to the 90-acre project area during the four to eight weeks that juniper removal work is expected to occur. This represents a small portion of the overall (3,445-acre) property. The project would not in the long-term change the existing uses of the land, and the site is not within any specially designated area that would prohibit the proposed activity.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed project would alter visual conditions of the site by reducing the tree coverage. The tree removal area currently has a high density of juniper trees relative to surrounding lands, which generally include large expanses of grass with areas of lower-density trees and shrubs. The project involves no new structures, would not interfere with public views, and would not otherwise adversely affect the natural visual character of the area.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed juniper removal project would not introduce new operational sources of air emissions or otherwise affect air quality in the long term. Minor temporary increases in site emissions from gasoline- and/or diesel-powered construction equipment and vehicles would occur during juniper removal. Dust emissions from juniper removal would be minor based on the nature of the activity and the time of year (fall/winter). The project site is not located in an area designated by the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality as a

Non-Attainment Area or Maintenance Area with current or historic issues meeting air quality standards.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Juniper removal activities would temporarily elevate noise above background levels during daylight hours while work is occurring. The noise-generating activities, including tracked feller-buncher, saw, excavator, and skid steer operation, are relatively common for land management activities in rural areas. The proposed juniper removal work is not adjacent to sensitive noise receptors such as residential neighborhoods, schools, or hospitals.

12. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed juniper removal would present no long-term risks to human health and safety. Temporary worker safety hazards associated with the operation of a feller-buncher, excavator, and skid steer, would be minimized through adherence to applicable safety regulations.

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: CTWS owns the property on which the proposed juniper removal would occur. No additional landowner coordination is needed.

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

Signed:

John Vlastelicia
Environmental Protection Specialist