Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy

Proposed Action: Spokane Tribe Upland Research, Monitoring & Evaluation Activities

Project No.: 2024-004-00

Project Manager: Carlos Matthew, EWU-4

Location: Stevens and Lincoln counties, Washington

Categorical Exclusion Applied (from 10 C.F.R. Part 1021): B3.3 Research related to conservation of fish, wildlife, and cultural resources; B3.2 Aviation activities

Description of the Proposed Action: Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) proposes to fund the Spokane Tribe of Indians (Spokane Tribe) to perform research, monitoring, and evaluation activities within upland habitat areas on Spokane Tribe Reservation lands. Funding supports ongoing efforts to mitigate for effects of the Federal Columbia River Power System on fish and wildlife in the main stem 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.). Activities would inform wildlife management decisions and identify key winter habitat for various species. By estimating population demographics (e.g., population size, sex ratios, age ratios) and monitoring population trends, the activities would provide critical data to assess the health of wildlife populations and support sustainable resource management in the Pacific Northwest.

BPA proposes to fund aerial game surveys, animal capture and collaring, and ground-based avian surveys, as described further below. Data collection activities would be designed to be temporary, localized, and minimally invasive and would adhere to established wildlife research protocols. Additionally, audio/visual observation data may be recorded on target species if opportunistically encountered during other field activities. For all activities, work would take place during daytime hours in upland habitats throughout the reservation boundaries, and no ground disturbance or alteration of habitat would be necessary. For ground-based activities, personnel would access sites primarily by foot, utility task vehicle (UTV), and/or four-wheel-drive (4WD) vehicle, prioritizing the use of existing roads and trails.

Aerial Big Game Surveys: Surveys would be conducted once annually during winter or early spring, prior to the fawning/calving season, using a helicopter-based survey team. The surveys would take place over 3 to 4 consecutive days. The helicopter would fly at a relatively low altitude and speed, systematically traversing predetermined sections of land to locate and record data on deer (*Odocoileus spp.)*, elk (*Cervus canadensis*), and moose (*Alces alces*) (ungulates) in the area. The helicopter could also circle over found populations to obtain accurate data. This information would be used, in part, to inform animal capture and collaring activities (see description below). High-use ungulate areas would be prioritized and flown annually, while areas with low visibility or low animal numbers may be surveyed in alternating years, depending on snowpack and visibility.

Animal Capture and Collaring: Capture activities would target elk, deer, and moose during winter and early spring, after aerial big game surveys were completed. Specific capture locations would be highly variable and dynamic. The capture locations would be selected based on real-time animal activity and the aerial pre-capture monitoring. Capture and collar activities would be focused on adult females and collars would be designed to fall off automatically, avoiding unneeded stress for recapture and collar removal. The primary capture method would be clover trapping. This involves a trap constructed from netting or rope resembling a large net enclosure, which would be baited to attract animals, allowing for capture without injury. Clover trapping would occur intermittently throughout the winter months, typically from January to March, and could be implemented in consecutive years if additional collars are available for deployment. Individual clover traps might be set for up to two weeks before being relocated if animals are not being captured. In some cases, aerial net-gunning could also be employed. This method would require 1 to 3 days for completion, depending on the number of animals targeted, and appropriate chase length guidelines would be followed. Once captured, data would be collected, potentially including blood sample collection, and the animal would be fitted with a GPS collar for ongoing monitoring.

In certain circumstances, and at the discretion of the Wildlife Program Manager, chemical immobilization could be used to capture and/or process animals to ensure the safety of both the animal and the research team. Any chemical immobilizations would be timed to occur well outside the hunting season for deer, to prevent the harvesting of recently tranquilized animals. All captured animals would be fitted with ear tags and collar tags indicating "call before consuming" to ensure sufficient time has passed since chemical immobilization before potential consumption.

Ground-based Avian Surveys: Surveys would be conducted in the spring on ruffed and sharp-tailed grouse. Ruffed grouse (*Bonasa umbellus*) surveys would involve trained observers walking established transects and/or driving between specific points within suitable habitat to locate and record data. These surveys would occur throughout the spring season, with approximately 2 to 4 survey days in total. Sharp-tailed grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus*) lek counts would involve trained observers visiting known sites, typically at dawn, to count male grouse performing their courtship displays. These surveys would occur for 3 to 5 weeks with 2 to 3 surveys per week, up to approximately 15 survey days in total.

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]

DAPHNE DAY

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Daphne Day
Environmental Protection Specialist

Concur:

KATEY GRANGE

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NEPA Compliance Officer

Attachment(s): Environmental Evaluation

[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 evaluation 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: Spokane Tribe Upland Research, Monitoring & Evaluation Activities

Project Site Description

The current Spokane Indian Reservation, roughly 150,000 acres, is located in northeastern Washington state. The reservation is located almost entirely in Stevens County, with a very small portion in Lincoln County. The lands are characteristic of the arid montane area of the northern Columbia Basin, transitioning to the Okanagan highlands to the north. Habitats present including grassland-sagebrush shrub steppe and riparian areas along the waterways and uplands, with a Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) zone at higher elevations and ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*) and Western juniper (*Juniperus occidentalis*) zones at lower elevations. Land use includes large expanses where new development is restricted and residential areas are generally small, scattered, and low intensity. Within the upland forests, a combination of active livestock grazing and logging activities can be found. Agricultural use is present in the valleys; there are also active gravel/sand extraction areas within the reservation boundaries.

Some of the reservation lands have been protected as wildlife mitigation areas, where no non-salvage logging can occur and entry is restricted during winter range and calving/fawning periods. Large portions of these wildlife areas designated as big game winter range and wildlife emphasis areas, as well potential Columbian sharp-tailed grouse habitat on the reservation, have burned within the last ten years. These areas are currently infested with several species of noxious weeds, which outcompete the native plant species that wildlife depend on for forage and cover.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed actions would be limited to wildlife monitoring. Activities would not result in ground disturbance that could potentially impact archaeological resources. No modifications to existing built historic resources are proposed. Therefore, the proposed actions would have no potential to cause effects to historic properties.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No new ground disturbance or excavation would occur as a result of the proposed actions. Ground vehicle use (UTV, 4WD) on existing roads and trails is consistent with current land uses and would not result in new significant impacts to geology or soils. Therefore, the proposed actions would not impact geology or soils beyond existing conditions.

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

Potential for Significance: No with conditions

Explanation: The proposed actions would not require any tree or vegetation removal or management. Limited disturbance could occur from trampling of plants or habitats, if present. However, the proposed actions would be temporary and the net effect of these actions would be similar to those associated with routine events and processes that commonly occur (e.g., large wildlife traversing the area, human recreation). Undesirable or noxious weed infestation occurs in scattered areas across the reservation; best management practices would reduce the likelihood of additional spread from proposed actions. In accordance with the Endangered Species Act (ESA), BPA utilized the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Information for Planning and Consultation (IPaC) tool in September 2025, which listed the federally-threatened Spalding's catchfly (*Silene spaldingii*), as a potentially-present species; no designated critical habitat is present. However, the likelihood of impacts to this species that is dormant during the winter, with the conditions outlined below, is negligible. Therefore, the proposed actions would have no effect on special-status species or habitats that may be in project areas and would not result in long-term impact to other plant species.

Notes:

- To minimize impacts during spring surveys, ensure all vehicles remain strictly on existing roads and trails, and brief all field personnel to actively look out for and avoid any emergent Spalding's Catchfly plants.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There are many wildlife species present throughout the reservation, including large mammals like deer, elk, moose, bear, and cougar as well as important species for hunting like waterfowl and upland game species. Per the USFWS IPAC tool, the list of ESA-listed threatened or endangered species is limited to the yellow-billed cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*). While suitable habitat is potentially present at some of the field sites, the yellow-billed cuckoo is functionally extinct in the state of Washington, with no known occurrences near the project area. Thus, the species are unlikely to occur near the project area and the proposed actions are unlikely to have any effect. Two proposed species, the monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*) and Suckley's cuckoo bumble bee (*Bombus suckleyi*), also have the potential to occur and may be affected by proposed actions through trampling of host plants; however, the project is unlikely to jeopardize the continued existence of the species. Gray wolf (*Canis lupus*), which are federally-delisted but still considered threatened by the state, are known to occur in the vicinity. Other state-listed terrestrial species with documented occurrences near the reservation include flammulated owl (*Otus flammelous*) and Townsend's big-eared bat (*Caroynorhinus townsendii*); both are nocturnal and thus would be unaffected by project activities which are occurring during daytime hours only.

All animal capture and survey activities would employ established scientific protocols designed to minimize stress and comply with animal welfare standards. Additional disturbance of normal wildlife behavior could occur from elevated noise and human presence at the various field sites, such as during helicopter surveys, but this disturbance would be limited in duration. The proposed actions would not result in adverse modification to any suitable protected species habitat. Therefore, the proposed actions would have no effect on special-status species or habitats that may be in project areas and would not result in long-term negative impact to other wildlife species.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No action proposed here would physically alter aquatic habitats; there would be no adverse physical changes to water bodies, floodplains, or fish from these actions. Therefore, the proposed actions would have no effect on water bodies, floodplains, or fish.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: All proposed activities would take place within upland habitat areas, where no wetlands are located. Therefore, the proposed actions would not impact wetlands.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

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

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No project action would permanently alter the capability of the land to be used as it was prior to these actions. Therefore, there would be no negative impact to land use or any specially-designated areas.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be no change in visual quality.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Minor and temporary dust and emissions could increase in the local area from vehicle and equipment use. However, these actions would be consistent with current land use activities typical of the field sites. There would be no permanent change in air quality.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Minor and temporary noise could increase at field sites from helicopter, vehicle and equipment use, and human presence. However, these actions would be temporary and consistent with current land use activities typical of the field sites. There would be no permanent change in ambient noise.

12. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Individuals carrying out the proposed actions would be trained in proper techniques and use of all equipment. Therefore, the project would not create conditions that would increase risk to human health and safety and no impacts are expected as a result of the proposed actions.

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 project would occur on land owned by the Spokane Tribe, who would be implementing the project. No coordination or outreach would be required.

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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