

# Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration  
Department of Energy



**Proposed Action:** Bull Run Creek RM 0.5 Geotechnical Investigation

**Project No.:** 2000-031-00

**Project Manager:** Chad Baumler, EWL-4

**Location:** Grant County, Oregon

**Categorical Exclusion Applied (from 10 C.F.R. Part 1021):** B3.1 Site Characterization and Environmental Monitoring

**Description of the Proposed Action:** Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) proposes to fund the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) to conduct a geotechnical investigation on federal and private lands in Grant County, Oregon. The purpose of the geotechnical work is to help inform the design of the future Bull Run Creek River Mile (RM) 0.5 Fish Habitat Enhancement project. Bull Run Creek is a tributary of Granite Creek in the North Fork John Day River sub-basin and is habitat for Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed Mid-Columbia River (MCR) steelhead trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*), ESA-listed bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*), and Chinook salmon (*O. tshawytscha*).

The future habitat enhancement project would address the effects of past dredge mining at the site, and the geotechnical investigation is needed to understand the physical and hydrologic properties of the site's mine tailings, as these are critical factors in developing effective treatments. The proposed geotechnical investigation would involve two kinds of sampling:

1. **Monitoring well installation:** Five borings would be excavated using a 10-inch diameter bit on a truck-mounted air rotary drill rig. Actual depths of the borings would be determined in the field at the time of exploration, but they are estimated to be between 30 and 75 feet below the ground surface. Drill spoils would be left in the immediate area and re-deposited into the bore holes once monitoring is completed.
2. **Tailing stratigraphy and composition testing:** Thirteen test pits measuring approximately 10 feet by 10 feet on the surface and extending 10 to 12 feet below the ground surface would be excavated within existing roadbeds or previously graded surfaces. Excavation would end at the depth of undisturbed native material or the maximum depth the equipment is able to reach above native material. Native material would be placed near the pits on existing hard surfaces and would be returned to the pits after investigations are complete. Access to these sites would be on existing roads and would not require modification of roads prior to use.

By informing the design process for the future fish habitat enhancement project, these actions would support conservation of ESA-listed species considered in the 2020 ESA consultations with both the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) on the operation and maintenance of the Columbia River System. These actions would 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 the current *DOE National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Implementing Procedures*, 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.

John Vlastelicia  
Environmental Protection Specialist

Concur:

Katey C. Grange  
NEPA Compliance Officer

Attachment(s): Environmental Evaluation

# 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: Bull Run Creek RM 0.5 Geotechnical Investigation

### Project Site Description

The project area is located just southeast of the small city of Granite in Grant County, Oregon, and it includes portions in the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest and on privately owned rural land. Granite Hill Road parallels Bull Run Creek in the project area. The proposed borings and test pits are located within the design area for a future habitat enhancement project, which encompasses the historic Bull Run Creek floodplain from approximately the Grant County Road 24 crossing at the downstream end to the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) 7366 road crossing at the upstream end. The area has been extensively altered by historic dredge mining, which removed riparian vegetation, left mine tailings across the valley bottom, and left the creek disconnected from its historic floodplain. Lodgepole pine trees have established on the mine tailings, but the riparian area of Bull Run Creek is a narrow band along the channel margin and small floodplain pockets where vegetation is primarily small patches of willows and alders mixed with low-growing grasses, sedges, rushes, and forbs.

### Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

#### 1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: BPA conferred with the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest (WWNF) and determined that BPA would be the lead federal agency for consultation under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. BPA initiated consultation and determined on August 25, 2025, that the proposed geotechnical investigation would result in no historic properties affected. The consulting parties included the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), CTUIR, the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon, and the Burns-Paiute Tribe. SHPO acknowledged receipt of the consultation letter on August 25, 2025. On September 24, 2025, BPA received a response from CTUIR disagreeing with BPA's effect determination and requesting a cultural resource inventory of the Area of Potential Effects (APE).

A cultural resource inventory that included a field survey of the APE was conducted and a report prepared to document the results. Upon reviewing the report, BPA determined that the proposed geotechnical investigation would result in no historic properties affected. BPA submitted a letter with this determination and the inventory report to the consulting parties on April 3, 2026. SHPO acknowledged receipt of the letter and report on April 6, 2026. No other responses were received during the 30-day comment period ending May 3, 2026.

Notes:

- 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: Drilling the five geotechnical borings and excavating the thirteen test pits would require ground disturbance. Drill spoils from the borings would be placed in the immediate area after extraction and then re-deposited into the bore holes once monitoring is completed. Similarly, the excavated material for the test pits would be placed near the pits on hard surfaces and would be returned to the pits after investigations are complete. Access to the boring and test pit locations would be via existing roads or over mine tailings, with no new access roads or road modifications needed to complete the investigations.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The geotechnical investigation would involve little vegetation disturbance and no tree removal. The proposed boring and test pit locations are within the bounds of areas previously disturbed by mine tailing placement and leveling and are along or near existing roads and access routes where vegetation is lacking or is sparse. Small areas of temporary vegetation disturbance may be expected in the footprints of some borings (10-inch diameter holes) and test pits (10-foot by 10-foot pits) and where equipment drives over mine tailings to access certain boring and test pit locations.

The site is not within the geographic range of any federal ESA-listed plant species, and there are no documented occurrences of state special-status plant species in the project area.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The geotechnical investigation could temporarily deter wildlife from using the project area, due to the noise, ground disturbance, and visual disturbance associated with human presence and equipment operation. Such impacts would be temporary. The proposed geotechnical work would not involve permanent alterations to wildlife habitat.

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 a valley bottom at an elevation of approximately 4,600 feet and does not provide the steep terrain with deep, persistent spring snowpack that is the typical suitable habitat for wolverine denning. While wolverine 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 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: Bull Run Creek in the project area is designated critical habitat for federal ESA-listed MCR steelhead trout and bull trout. It is also habitat for other non-listed fish species including Chinook salmon and redband trout.

The proposed geotechnical investigation would not involve borings or test pits within Bull Run Creek active flows or within the creek's ordinary high water level. The activity would also not involve removal of riparian vegetation, disposal of drill cuttings into the stream, or other site alterations that would degrade water quality or in-stream habitat conditions. The proposed geotechnical investigation would therefore have no effect on ESA-listed MCR

steelhead trout and bull trout and their critical habitat, or on non-listed fish species and their habitat. The testing would inform design of the habitat restoration project that would benefit these species in the long term.

The borings and test pits would involve temporary removal of soil and then refilling the bore holes and test pits with the extracted material once the investigation is completed. The activity would not result in any net fill in the floodplain and would not otherwise impact flood conveyance, storage capacity, or other floodplain functions.

## 6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: National Wetland Inventory mapping identifies wetlands in the project area that include Bull Run Creek (a riverine wetland), freshwater ponds, and freshwater forested/shrub wetlands. Many of the pond features are dredge ponds from past mining operations. The proposed project does not involve borings, test pits, or other excavation or fill activity in wetlands.

## 7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Developing an understanding of groundwater conditions is one of the purposes of the geotechnical investigation, and two of the deep borings would be developed as temporary groundwater monitoring wells. The monitoring wells would be constructed per applicable state and local regulations and would be made of 2-inch-diameter polyvinyl chloride well casing with factory-slotted well screens. These monitoring wells would be installed within the uppermost aquifer encountered during well drilling. Monitoring is expected to occur until late 2025, after which time the instrumentation would be removed and the holes filled with excavated material.

The geotechnical investigation would involve small volumes of groundwater pumping as part of the monitoring well development. The activities would not involve contaminant discharges to the subsurface and would not involve long-term withdrawals that would affect the water table.

The project is not located within a Groundwater Restricted Area designated by the Oregon Department of Water Resources or within a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency-designated Sole Source Aquifer.

## 8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The geotechnical investigation would include borings and test pits in rural Grant County on private properties and federal land managed by the U.S. Forest Service (Wallowa-Whitman National Forest). The investigation would be performed with permission from the private landowners and under a Special Use Permit issued by USFS. The project is a short-term activity that would not change the existing uses or capabilities of the land and would not prevent public access to USFS land. The site is not within any specially designated area that would prohibit the proposed activity.

## 9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The presence of a drill rig, excavator, and personnel vehicles would be visible while the geotechnical investigation is occurring. The activity would not change the visual character of the area over the long-term, however, as the borings and test pits would be refilled with the excavated material at the completion of the investigation. The activity would not interfere with use of scenic public viewpoints, and the site is not located within the

protected boundaries of a Wild and Scenic River, State Scenic Waterway, or other designated scenic area.

## 10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed geotechnical investigation 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 equipment and vehicles would occur while the investigation is happening. Dust emissions from site activity would be minor based on the nature of the activity and the small area of ground disturbance. The project site is not located in an area designated by the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality as a Non-Attainment or Maintenance Area with current or historic issues meeting air quality standards.

## 11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The operation of a drill rig, excavator, and personnel vehicles would temporarily elevate noise above background levels while the geotechnical investigation is occurring. The work would occur during daylight hours. There are some rural residences in the general project vicinity, but there are no residential neighborhoods, schools, hospitals, or other sensitive noise receptors that would be impacted by the noise. The project would not introduce any new operational noise sources that would increase noise in the area over the long term.

## 12. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed geotechnical investigation would present no long-term risks to human health and safety. Temporary worker safety hazards associated with operation of a drill rig and excavator 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: CTUIR is coordinating the geotechnical investigation with USFS and the affected private landowners and would perform the work with their permissions.

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