Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy

Proposed Action: Couse Creek River Mile 7.5-9 Low-Tech Process Based Restoration

Project No.: 2007-396-00

Project Manager: Jennifer Lord – EWU - 4

Location: Umatilla 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 Walla Walla Basin Watershed Council (WWBWC) to implement a low-tech process-based restoration (LTPBR) project on Couse Creek. Specifically, the project would install post-assisted log structures (PALS) and beaver dam analogues (BDAs). The LTPBR would mimic natural river processes to restore ecological function, which would improve channel floodplain connectivity, water quality, and habitat for ESA-listed species: spring Chinook, steelhead, and bull trout. These actions would support conservation of ESA-listed species considered in the 2020 ESA consultations with National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) on the operations and maintenance of the Columbia River System while also supporting ongoing efforts to mitigate for effects of the Federal Columbia River System (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.).

Up to 150 PALS and 10 BDAs would be constructed in the channel and floodplain along 1.5 river miles of Couse Creek. Structures would be built from locally sourced, untreated lumber and woody debris, varying in size up to approximately 18 inches in diameter and 30 feet in length. Staging and installation of structures would include use of hand tools, skid steers, hydraulic post-pounders, excavators, chainsaws, and ATVs. Ground disturbances would be minimally invasive but may include digging with hand tools, backfilling and partial burying of structures with onsite materials, driving post up to approximately 4-feet-deep, and ground compaction during staging. Following construction, structures and riparian areas would be revegetated with native species. Measures would be taken to preserve existing trees and native vegetations.

The project would occur during low-flow conditions, from July through October, when the stream would be nearly dry. Staging, site access, and materials transportation would be limited to designated areas and paths and accessed only by foot or small vehicles such as ATVs or skid steer.

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.

LINDSEY AROTIN

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Lindsey Mills
Environmental Protection Specialist

Concur:

KATEY GRANGE

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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: Couse Creek River Mile 7.5-9 Low-Tech Process Based Restoration

Project Site Description

Couse Creek originates from mid-elevation headwaters of the Blue Mountains in northeast Oregon and is a tributary to the Walla Walla River. The project site is located within a valley bottom at an elevation of 2,000 feet roughly 7 miles southeast of Milton-Freewater in Umatilla County, Oregon. The project would occur on private land, along 1.5 miles of stream and surrounding floodplain amounting to approximately 43 acres. Past land management activities (including grazing, agriculture, timber harvest, and channel clearing) have left the land ecologically degraded. The channel is primarily a single thread throughout the length of the project with little structure or habitat. The valley bottom vegetation consists of patches of cottonwood and willows, non-native grasses, and noxious weeds.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: BPA made a determination of no historic properties affected on March 27, 2025 (BPA CR Project No.: OR 2024 156). BPA received response from Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Reservation (CTUIR) on April 7, 2025, requesting clarification on testing methodology in the report. On April 18, 2025, a revised report was sent to the consulting parties. BPA received responses from the Nez Perce Tribe on April 21, 2025, and from the State Historical Preservation Office on April 28, 2025, both parties concurred with BPAs determination and revisions. CTUIR did not respond again within the 30-day consultation period.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The LTPBR activities would disturb soils on the project site. Localized and minimally invasive disturbances would include digging with hand tools, use of a hydraulic post pounder, and soil compaction from use of an excavator during staging. Best Management Practices (BMP) would be used to avoid or minimize temporary fine sediment impacts and erosion during construction.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There are no special status species or Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed plant species known to exist on the site. Ground disturbance would be limited to the small, localized areas where LTPBR structures are built. Minor trampling of herbaceous vegetation may occur along access paths, but existing native vegetation would be salvaged when possible. Any impact would be localized and temporary. In the long term, additional plantings near BDAs and PALS would enhance the riparian overstory and displace non-native plant species.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: According to the USFWS Information and Planning and Conservation (IPaC) tool, the project site is within the geographic range of the ESA-listed threatened North American wolverine, and two proposed species, the monarch butterfly and the Suckley's cuckoo bee.

There are no reported occurrences of wolverines in or near the area. Their presence in a valley bottom would be unlikely as they are primarily found in high-altitude mountain ranges at elevations above 7,000 feet. The proposed project would have no effect on North American wolverines.

There are no reported occurrences of monarch butterflies or Suckley's cuckoo bees in or near the project area; the project area does not overlap with proposed critical habitat; and the project site lacks suitable vegetation and habitat conditions for these species. The proposed project would have no effect on monarch butterflies or Suckley's cuckoo bees.

Presence of two migratory USFWS Bird of Conservation Concern (BCC) species, Calliope hummingbird and Northern harrier, have been identified near the project site according to Cornell Lab of Ornithology database. If present, disturbances would be minor and temporary, and conservation measure would be used to minimize impact.

No other ESA-listed or special status species have been documented in or near the project area and no designated critical habitats are present. Non-listed resident wildlife species may be temporarily disturbed by noise and human presence during PALS and BDA installation; however, effects would be minor and baseline conditions would return following construction. Overall, the LTPBR is expected to improve aquatic and riparian conditions, which would benefit wildlife in the long term.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The LTPBR would permanently alter a portion of the waterway and would disrupt aquatic life. Impacts to ESA-listed species, including summer steelhead, spring Chinook, and bull trout would be covered under the BPA's programmatic Habitat Improvement Program (HIP) biological opinion with the USFWS and NMFS. Construction activities would have temporary effects such as increased turbidity, habitat disturbances, and increased physiological stress to aquatic life. The project would be constructed during low flow and BMPs would be used to minimize impacts such as soil erosion, excess sediment downstream, and turbidity. Work zone isolation and fish passage techniques would be used as needed but due to low-flow conditions, presence of ESA-listed fish or other species would be unlikely. In the long term, this project would improve water quality and habitat for ESA-listed and non-listed aquatic species. All necessary permits would be obtained by WWBWC.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The National Wetland Inventory identified approximately 20 acres of riverine wetland in the project area. The proposed ground disturbances during LTPBR activities would have minor, temporary, effects on wetland vegetation, soils, and water distribution. The proposed project is designed to reactivate the floodplain by encouraging interaction through multi-threaded channels and increasing inundation. Overall, the project is expected to improve wetland function, abundance, and ecological value in the long term.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Although there would be ground disturbances as a result of the LTPBRl restoration, the work is not expected to substantially affect groundwater and aquifers. Groundwater recharge and water table levels would potentially improve as a result of increased water storage throughout the floodplain and wetland. The proposed project would either have no effect or a positive effect on groundwater and water tables.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There are no specially designated areas in the project area and no change in land use would occur as a result of the proposed LTPBR restoration. The project is located on private land used for agriculture, however, the land within the project area is fallow and the landowner would maintain access. Therefore, the proposed actions would not impact land use.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed LTPBR restoration would have temporary and permanent changes to the landscape. Visual changes due to staging woody material and equipment, vegetation disturbances, and human presence would be minor and short-term. Upon completion, changes such as increased riparian habitat, wetlands, and natural waterway structures would be permanent and overall improve visual quality.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: A temporary increase in emissions and dust from vehicles accessing the Couse Creek RM 7.5-9 project site would be very minor and short-term during construction, but conditions would resume to normal immediately once the project is completed.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed work would result in a temporary increase in ambient noise. Any noise emitted from construction equipment would be short-term and temporary during daylight hours and would cease following project completion.

12. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed work is not considered hazardous, nor does it result in any health or safety risks to the general public. There would be no soil contamination or hazardous conditions and no CERCLA sites.

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 WWBWC and Anabranch Solutions, the project designer, developed and agreed upon the proposed actions collaboratively with the landowner. Construction schedules, staging, and mobilization of equipment would be coordinated with the landowners.

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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