Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy

Proposed Action: Orofino Creek Watershed Steelhead Genetic Assessment

Project No.: 2008-604-00

Project Manager: Matthew Schwartz, EWM-4

Location: Clearwater County, Idaho

Categorical Exclusion Applied (from 10 C.F.R. Part 1021): B1.20 Protection of cultural resources, fish and wildlife habitat; B3.3 Research related to conservation of fish and wildlife

Description of the Proposed Action: Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) proposes to fund Trout Unlimited (TU) to collect and analyze genetic samples of juvenile steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) in the Orofino Creek watershed to determine if fish present in the creek have anadromous influence. The results of the proposed work would help inform fish passage and habitat restoration projects in the watershed to support Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed steelhead.

TU would work in partnership with the Nez Perce Tribe to collect juvenile steelhead using electrofishing and angling sampling methods. A backpack electrofisher would be operated instream per National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) guidance. Angling would occur if electrofishing methods are not successful and would be implemented from the banks of the creek. Work would occur in Orofino Creek and its tributaries, specifically Whiskey Creek, with a focus on areas above potential passage barriers, such as cascades. Sites would be accessed using existing roads and parking areas. Crews would walk short distances from parking areas to the stream and would walk along or in the stream while angling or electrofishing. Crews would use existing trails where available or choose routes that would result in minimal disturbance to vegetation. A fin clip would be taken from collected juvenile steelhead and preserved for subsequent genetic analysis. Fish would be released back into Orofino Creek after samples are taken. Preserved samples would be sent to the Eagle Fish Genetics Lab in Eagle, Idaho, for genetic analysis.

Funding the proposed activities would support conservation of ESA-listed species considered in the 2020 NMFS Columbia River System Biological Opinion. These activities also support ongoing efforts to mitigate for effects of the Federal Columbia River Power System 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.

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Concur:

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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: Orofino Creek Watershed Steelhead Genetic Assessment

Project Site Description

Orofino Creek is a tributary of the Clearwater River and its watershed contains a mixture of state, federal, and private lands. The confluence of the Clearwater and Orofino Creek is at the City of Orofino in Clearwater County, Idaho. The Orofino Creek watershed is characterized by deep canyons that are lower in elevation, drier, and warmer. Orofino Creek and its tributary, Whiskey Creek, contain miles of designated critical habitat for steelhead. There are documented barriers (cascades) to anadromous fish at several locations in the watershed; however, there are reports of steelhead successfully navigating some of these cascades. The lower stretch of Orofino Creek flows through an urban area, along the City of Orofino. The upper watershed is in a combination of grazing land and forests.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: This project does not involve ground disturbance of any kind. There is no potential to affect cultural resources.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: This project does not involve ground disturbance of any kind. There is no potential to affect geology and soils.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The US Fish and Wildlife Service's Information for Planning and Conservation (IPaC) tools lists Spalding's catchfly (*Silene spaldingii*), ESA-listed Threatened, as having the potential to be in the watershed; however, there is no designated critical habitat and no confirmed presence in the watershed. Work would occur along the banks or instream, which is not habitat for the Spalding's catchfly (typically present in grasslands and not in the riparian area or stream). Therefore, there is no potential to affect ESA-listed plant communities. There are no state special-status plant species in the watershed. Work crews accessing streams by foot may trample vegetation, but the proposed action does not include any vegetation management, ground disturbance, or actions that would remove or kill vegetation.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: IPaC lists the North American wolverine (*Gulo gulo luscus*), ESA-listed Threatened, as having the potential to be in the watershed. In addition, IPaC lists the monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*), ESA-proposed Threatened, and Suckley's cuckoo bumble bee

(*Bombus suckleyi*), ESA-proposed Endangered, as having the potential to be present in the watershed. There are no critical habitats for ESA-listed or proposed species in the watershed and no confirmed presence of any of the species in the watershed. Wolverines avoid human contact and are active during night and twilight hours, so would be unlikely to be present when work occurs during daylight hours. Monarch butterflies and Suckley's cuckoo bumblebees may be present but worker presence would be short-term, and vegetation disturbance would be limited to a narrow path to the stream and would not remove or destroy habitat preferred by these species. Therefore, there is no potential to affect ESA-listed wildlife.

There would be temporary disturbance and displacement of wildlife in the immediate area of the proposed actions due to noise and human presence. However, the actions are short-term (a few hours during a day and a limited number of days spread throughout the summer), and habitat would not be altered (no ground or vegetation disturbance). The proposed activities (driving to sites on established roads, walking to streams, and fishing or electrofishing) would occur on publicly accessible land. Impacts to local wildlife would be similar to impacts from the general public accessing the streams in the same manner. There would be no long-term effect on wildlife or their habitat.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Proposed actions would not change the existing conditions of water bodies or floodplains and would have no impact on them. Snake River Basin steelhead and their designated critical habitat are present in the watershed. There are no other federally-listed or state special-status fish species in the project area.

Electrofishing would disturb sediment and temporarily increase turbidity in the areas where crews walk in the stream. Suspended sediments would resettle and turbidity would quickly return to pre-existing conditions once the activity was completed. Electrofishing would also temporarily immobilize some fish and other aquatic species within a limited area around the electrofishing probe. Since the target species and life stage is juvenile steelhead, the electrofishing settings would be low enough that larger fish in the area wouldn't be affected. Organisms that are affected would be temporarily immobilized, netted, and placed in buckets for a short duration to allow them to recover. The activity would not cause injury or long-term harm to most individuals. Juvenile steelhead would be handled and have a small portion of a fin clipped off. This is not expected to impact their survival but would cause short-term physiological stress and potentially alter locomotion temporarily. There is a possibility that a few individuals would die because of the electrofishing or handling. All fish and other aquatic organisms would be returned to the stream when they show signs of recovery. Angling would result in catch of juvenile steelhead, as well as incidental catch of other fish of similar size. There would be minor, short-term effects from handling after being caught, and juvenile steelhead would experience the same effects described above related to fin clipping. All fish would be released back into the stream immediately or after a brief period to clip fins. Overall, effects of fish sampling activities would be localized, minor, and temporary in nature for ESA-listed fish and other aquatic organisms. Fish sampling activities would be conducted in accordance with a Section 10 scientific research permit issued by NMFS (Permit Number 1339-6R, expiration December 31, 2026) to the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, of which the Nez Perce Tribe is a member, and following all terms and conditions of that permit.

The results of the genetic sampling would help inform future habitat or fish passage restoration projects in the watershed for the benefit of ESA-listed steelhead.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The project would not take place within or around wetlands, and therefore, there is no potential to affect wetlands.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No groundwater withdrawal and no discharge of pollutants would occur. There would be no effect on groundwater or aquifers.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be no changes to land use or impacts to specially-designated areas, and no potential to affect land use or specially-designated areas.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Occupancy of access routes by vehicles and people may temporarily intrude on what would otherwise be a natural landscape for several hours over the course of multiple days during summer months. However, the sites accessed are also open to the public and work crew presence would have a similar impact on visual quality to presence of the general public. There would be no change to the vegetation or landform, no construction of new structures, and thus, no change to visual quality in the long term.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: A temporary increase in emissions and dust from vehicles accessing the project site would be very minor and short-term when crews access sites for sampling. Air quality would return to normal conditions immediately once crews left.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed work would result in a temporary increase in ambient noise. Any noise emitted from work crews and their gear would be short-term and temporary, occur during daylight hours, and 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 public. Proposed actions working in and around water pose some risk to crew health and safety. All actions are standard and customary fisheries management activities that would follow accepted practices that ensure safe working conditions and would mitigate the risks inherent in outdoor work and work on the water (gloves and boots in the woods, protective gear when electrofishing, *etc.*).

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: TU would access the watershed mainly through state and federal public lands and have coordinated with staff in these agencies about the project. TU may need to access private timber company land that is open for public access to get to some parts of the watershed and would coordinate with staff at the company if this occurs.

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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