

# Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration

Department of Energy



**Proposed Action:** Nonnative Fish Suppression in Flathead Lake

**Project No.:** 1991-019-010

**Project Manager:** Virginia Preiss, EWM-4

**Location:** Flathead and Lake counties, Montana

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

**Description of the Proposed Action:** Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) proposes to fund the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes' (CSKT) ongoing nonnative fish suppression and/or eradication efforts in Flathead Lake in northwest Montana where native populations are declining. This project is a CSKT cost-share in partnership with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP). BPA would continue funding for this program to mitigate for the altered hydrology and blocked passage of adfluvial trout caused by the construction and operation of Hungry Horse Dam. These actions would support conservation of Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed species considered in the 2020 ESA consultation with the U.S. Fish & 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 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.).

Nonnative fish species impact native westslope cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarkii lewisi*), a state-listed species of concern, and ESA-listed bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) populations throughout Flathead Lake via competition for resources, hybridization, and predation. Activities conducted under the CSKT's fish suppression program would include the following:

- **Fish suppression:** Fish suppression efforts are intended to result in reduced populations of nonnative lake trout (*S. namaycush*) allowing bull trout and cutthroat trout to recover. Suppression of lake trout in Flathead Lake would be accomplished by way of gill-netting and incentivized fishing events. Gill netting is a fishing method that captures fish by entangling them in vertically suspended nets. The nets are placed for various amounts of time and frequency. CSKT places the nets in the lake for 16 to 20 hours, 4 days a week, from March through December. Incentivized fishing events combine fishing with rewards. CSKT conducts two events, one in the spring and fall. Each event runs for about 60 days.
- **Collection and fish tagging:** Lake trout would be collected by angling and tagged to track individual fish over time to assess survival, movement, and health.

**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.

Brenda Aguirre  
Environmental Protection Specialist

Concur:

Sarah T. Biegel  
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: Nonnative Fish Suppression in Flathead Lake**

### **Project Site Description**

All activities would occur in Flathead Lake from its mouth, 7 miles south of Kalispell, to its outlet at Polson Bay, approximately 30 miles. Flathead Lake is a natural lake and was dammed in 1938 by Kerr Dam at its outlet on Polson Bay. The dam slightly raised the lake level and generates hydroelectric power. The south half of the lake is located on the Flathead Reservation. The north half is managed by the State of Montana. The surrounding areas are a mix of privately-owned rural residences, commercial businesses, agricultural pastureland and crop production; and state and tribal recreational areas.

### **Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources**

#### **1. Historic and Cultural Resources**

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed activities would not have the potential to affect historic properties.

#### **2. Geology and Soils**

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No ground disturbing activities are proposed; thus, the proposed activities would not have the potential to affect geology and soils.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No ground-disturbing or vegetation removal activities are proposed; thus, the proposed activities would not have the potential to affect plant species.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The actions would all occur in water and therefore would not have the potential to affect terrestrial wildlife. Noise generated by vehicles driving to and from worksites would be low and would not be expected to affect nesting birds. Foot traffic noise when working in or hiking to worksites would be negligible.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed action would occur in Flathead Lake. Portions of Flathead Lake lie within the 100-year flood zone, as mapped by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The proposed action would not involve placing structures in floodplains. No anadromous fish species are present due to anthropogenic blockages. ESA-listed bull trout and state-listed westslope cutthroat trout are present in Flathead Lake and its tributaries.

CSKT obtained an ESA Section 10 permit from USFWS for authorized activities in support of bull trout recovery. The permitted activities include capture (by gill net and fishing events), collect, temporarily hold, handle, anaesthetize, tag, and release of bull trout. CSKT would release westslope cutthroat trout as well.

To ensure minimal effects to ESA- and state-listed native fish species during suppression efforts in Flathead Lake, placement of nets in and around the primary inlets and outlet of the lake would be avoided to reduce bycatch of bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout. Any native fish encountered during removal of lake trout would be returned no more than 100 meters downstream of the capture location. All netting used for capturing, handling, and holding of fish, including the incidental capture of bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout, would be composed of fine mesh, knot-free material that would minimize injury to the fish. Nets would also be placed for no more than 20 hours at a time before handling the catch to minimize bycatch and the risk of injury and mortality. Handling of all listed species would be done as quickly as possible to minimize the risk of injury and mortality. To prevent the spread of invasive and nonnative species, all equipment, clothing, and boots would be cleaned before arriving at a project area.

## **6. Wetlands**

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Access to field sites would be accomplished using existing roads, or possibly on foot. No ground-disturbing activities are proposed; thus, the action would not have the potential to impact wetlands.

## **7. Groundwater and Aquifers**

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No ground-disturbing activities that may affect groundwater or aquifers are proposed; thus, the action would not have the potential to impact these resources.

## **8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas**

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Field sites would be accessed via existing road networks and boat launches. All activities would be compatible with local land use on public roads, public lands, or Flathead Reservation lands.

## **9. Visual Quality**

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed action would not impact visual quality.

## **10. Air Quality**

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Any increase in emissions from vehicles accessing field sites would be very minor and short term.

## **11. Noise**

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Any increase in ambient noise from vehicles accessing field sites would be very minor and short term.

## 12. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Workers carrying out the proposed action are trained in proper equipment management techniques. This activity is not considered hazardous, nor does it result in any health or safety risks to the general public.

### **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: While lake trout are not a "Level 1" species in the same way that some invasive species are, they are considered a high-priority target for removal because of their ecological impact. The proposed action is part of a defined management approach coordinated by CSKT and FWP and is designed to reduce lake trout numbers. Removal efforts aim to balance native trout recovery with maintaining a viable recreational fishery.

### **Landowner Notification, Involvement, or Coordination**

Description: The Project would occur entirely on Flathead Lake and use existing public roads and public and Tribal boat launches for lake access.

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

Signed:

Brenda Aguirre  
Environmental Protection Specialist