

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy



Proposed Action: Catherine Creek Hall Ranch Geotechnical Investigation

Project No.: 1992-026-01

Project Manager: Tracy Hauser – EWL - 4

Location: Union 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 Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) to conduct a preliminary geotechnical investigation. This investigation would inform project designs for Catherine Creek Hall Ranch Restoration project, which proposes to relocate a portion of Highway 203 out of the floodplain to improve aquatic, riparian, and floodplain habitats. These enhancements would benefit Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed spring Chinook salmon, summer steelhead, and bull trout. By informing the design process for the future fish habitat enhancement project, the proposed actions would support conservation of ESA-listed species considered in both the 2020 National Marine Fisheries Service Columbia River System Biological Opinion (2020 NMFS CRS BiOp) and the 2020 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Columbia River System BiOp (2020 FWS CRS BiOp) on the O&M of the Columbia River System. These actions would also support BPA's ongoing effort to mitigate for the 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.).

Within the proposed Hall Ranch restoration project corridor, approximately 45 geotechnical holes would be bored along about 1.7 miles of upland terrace outside the floodplain. The bores, 3 to 12 inches in diameter and up to 25 to 50 feet deep, would be drilled using small-tracked mechanical drills, with the support of a tracked water rig and utility trucks. The project area would be accessed via existing roads, the proposed alignment corridor, and with some limited overland travel to reach drill sites. Access may require the use of power tools and a mini-excavator to remove vegetation above ground such as brush and small trees with minor grading to level slopes. Upon completion, all bore holes would be backfilled and access routes would be reclaimed and re-seeded as necessary.

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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Lindsey Mills
Environmental Protection Specialist

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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: Catherine Creek Hall Ranch Geotechnical Investigation

Project Site Description

The project area is located southwest of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest (WWNF) in the Catherine Creek valley, approximately 11 miles southeast of Union, in Union County Oregon. Approximately 95% of the project area lies within Oregon State Universities' (OSU) Eastern Oregon Agricultural Research Center Hall Ranch, which is owned and managed by state of Oregon. The remaining portion of project area is privately owned and used for agriculture and timber harvesting.

This segment of Catherine Creek was channelized in the mid-to-late 20th century to facilitate timber harvest, transportation, and livestock grazing. These historic land uses resulted in stream incision, disconnected floodplains, reduced riparian vegetation, and degraded spawning and rearing habitat for ESA-listed salmonids. Much of the geotechnical investigation would occur along the upland terrace, consisting of shrub-steppe, sagebrush, and scattered ponderosa pines, with some boring and access through lowland meadows and wetland edges, consisting of sedges, rushes, reed canary grass, willow, and alder.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No with conditions

Explanation: Following previous consultation efforts conducted between 2017 and 2024, on March 12, 2025, BPA sent a letter to consulting parties, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) and the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), determining that proposed geotechnical investigations would have an adverse effect to historic properties. Oregon SHPO concurred with the determination on May 5, 2025. BPA notified the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) of the adverse effect and invited them to participate in the resolution process on May 13, 2025, which they declined on May 27, 2025. BPA, in conjunction with CTUIR cultural resources staff, developed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), which was signed by BPA and Oregon SHPO on December 18, 2025. This MOA included stipulations for project implementation including excavation of test units in advance of geotechnical drilling and monitoring of implementation activities.

In early 2026, project design updates were made requiring additional ground disturbing work. On April 10, 2026, BPA sent an update letter to consulting parties informing them of these changes and summarizing the results of additional analysis. In this letter, BPA also determined that the proposed actions were consistent with actions previously consulted on and recommended additional implementation monitoring within the 30-meter buffer of site boundaries. BPA also determined that no amendment to the MOA was required. Oregon SHPO acknowledged receipt of the letter on April 13, 2026. On May 10, 2026, the 30-day comment period expired, and no additional comments were received. (CR Project: OR 2016 109, SHPO Case No.: 17-0070)

Notes: Implementation measures: Stipulations in the Section 106 consultation MOA (dated December 18, 2025), are listed below:

- An archaeologist would be present to observe geotechnical investigations occurring within site boundaries and within a 30-meter buffer of site boundaries.

- The archaeologist would excavate a maximum of fifteen 50 cm x 50 cm test units in advance of geotechnical drilling, with one unit in each drilling location within known site boundaries, provided no test unit has been excavated in that location by previous cultural resource investigations.
- The archaeologist would examine the pathways of tracked vehicles within site boundaries for artifacts and other archaeological evidence. Pathway monitoring would occur within one (1) day of tracked vehicle movement through the archaeological site.
- In the unlikely event that cultural material is inadvertently encountered during the implementation of this project, BPA would require that work be halted in the vicinity of the finds until they can be inspected and assessed by BPA and in consultation with the appropriate consulting parties.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Soil would be displaced during the drilling of the geotechnical bore holes (3 to 12 inches in diameter and 25 to 50 feet deep). Additional ground disturbances include soil compacted from vehicle access, vegetation removal, and localized surface grading to level slopes in some locations. All bore holes would be backfilled, and graded, compacted, and denuded areas would be reclaimed upon completion. Overall, ground disturbances would be minor and cause no significant impacts to the geology and soils in the project area.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Existing vegetation would be disturbed during the geotechnical investigation. Impacts would include crushing and removal of vegetation along access routes, and localized surface grading as needed.

No federally listed, Oregon special-status species or designated critical habitats are known to be present in project areas. No listed species would be impacted.

Vegetation removal would involve only surface clearing to allow natural re-sprouting and disturbed areas would be decompacted and reseeded. Overall, the proposed projects would have a minor, localized and short-term impact on vegetation.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Wildlife may experience temporary disturbances and displacement during the geotechnical investigation due to increased noise, human presence, traffic, and equipment operation. Brush clearing may temporarily reduce small quantities of habitat, but these clearing actions would be temporary and in small, discrete locations limited to what is needed to access the boring sites. The underlying vegetation cover would remain and brush would grow back after the testing.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Information for Planning and Conservation (IPaC) tool lists North American wolverines (ESA threatened), two proposed species, the monarch butterfly (ESA proposed threatened) and the Suckley's cuckoo bumble bee (ESA proposed endangered), and bald and golden eagles as having the potential to be present in the project area. No designated critical habitats are present.

Wolverines and Suckley's cuckoo bumble bees have not been documented in or around the project area and due to limited habitat conditions, presence is unlikely and neither species would be impacted. There would be no effect to these species. Monarch Butterflies may experience minor and temporary disturbances due to vegetation clearing, but no lasting impact would occur.

Bald eagles, golden eagles, and various birds¹ identified as Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) by the Oregon State Wildlife Action Plan are known or expected within or around the geotechnical testing project area. Brush clearing and testing activities would occur in the fall outside of nesting season to minimize impacts. Brush clearing and small tree removal may temporarily reduce non-nesting habitat and cause minor disturbance, but no lasting impact would occur.

Columbia spotted frogs and western rattlesnakes, both SGCN, are known to be present in the project area. If present, both species may be temporarily impacted by ground vibration, soil compaction, at risk of potential crushing by heavy equipment. Best management practices such as visual surveillance prior to access would be used to minimize impact. Likely impact would be minor and short-term, however, there is a small potential risk of injury or death to individual animals

Following geotechnical testing, baseline habitat conditions would remain largely unchanged and wildlife activities resume. Overall, the proposed projects would have a neutral to no effect on wildlife.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No geotechnical investigation would occur in the stream or in riparian areas. ESA-listed bull trout, steelhead, Chinook salmon along with sensitive species such as pacific lamprey and interior redband trout, a SGCN in Oregon, are found in Catherine Creek. Catherine Creek is also a listed critical habitat for bull trout. All project activities would occur a minimum of 500 feet or more from the stream and as a result there would be no effect on any fish species, including ESA-listed and sensitive fish species. The geotechnical investigations would support the design and planning of the habitat restoration project that would provide a long-term benefit to fish species in the future.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: A small portion of the geotechnical investigation activities would occur within an area identified as a wetland by the National Wetland Inventory, a hydrologically isolated seasonal swale. Upon further review, it was determined by the Oregon Department of State Lands, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that the site does not meet jurisdictional wetland criteria. Therefore, the project would have no impact on wetlands.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No new wells or groundwater use are proposed. The geotechnical bores would expose some groundwater in order to measure the local water table in the project area. This exposure would be limited duration, and the bores would be refilled following completion of the geotechnical site characterization. There would be no long-term effect on the local groundwater.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The majority of the project area is owned and operated by the State of Oregon as an agriculture research area. The remaining property is privately owned and used for timber

¹ Bird SGCN: black-billed woodpecker, chipping sparrow, common nighthawk, Swainson's hawk, grasshopper sparrow, western meadowlark, white-headed woodpecker, and willow flycatcher.

harvesting and agriculture. The proposed geotechnical investigation would not impact land use.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be no changes to the visual quality of the area as a result of the geotechnical borings. All bores would be refilled following completion to restore the area to the original visual quality.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: A temporary increase in emissions and dust from the vehicle access, heavy equipment and boring would be minor and short-term during the geotechnical investigation. Conditions would return to baseline conditions upon completion.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The geotechnical investigation would result in a temporary increase in ambient noise during boring. Any noise emitted from vehicles and 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: ODFW, the Grande Ronde Model Watershed, and the Oregon Department of Transportation are coordinating the geotechnical investigation with OSU and private landowners to establish Right-of-Entry Agreements. Landowners would receive advance courtesy notices prior to project implementation.

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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