6450-01-P

DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY

Bonneville Power Administration

Bonneville - Hood River Vegetation Management Project

AGENCY: Bonneville Power Administration (BPA), Department of Energy (DOE).

ACTION: Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

SUMMARY: To maintain the reliability of its electrical system, BPA, in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service, needs to expand the range of vegetation management options used to clear unwanted vegetation on about 20 miles of BPA transmission line right-of-way between Bonneville Dam and Hood River, Oregon, within the Columbia Gorge National Scenic Area (NSA). We propose to continue controlling undesirable vegetation using a program of Integrated Vegetation Managment (IVM) which includes manual, biological and chemical treatment methods. BPA has prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) (DOE/EA-1257) evaluating the proposed project. Based on the analysis in the EA, BPA has determined that the proposed action is not a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment, within the meaning of the National Environmental Policy Act(NEPA) of 1969. Therefore, the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not required and BPA is issuing this FONSI.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, CONTACT: Inez S. Graetzer, Bonneville Power Administration, P.O. Box 3621 (ECN-4), Portland, Oregon, 97208-3621, phone number 503-230-3786, fax number 503-230-5699. For additional copies of this FONSI, please call BPA's toll-free document request line: 800-622-4520.

Public Availability This FONSI will be distributed to all persons and agencies known to be interested in or affected by the proposed action or alternatives.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: Trees and other tall-growing vegetation threaten system reliability by growing or falling into transmission lines. Shrubs and similar

vegetation also threaten reliability by growing into access roads and keeping maintenance crews from needed access to transmission towers and lines. When hot ambient temperatures combine with large loads of transmitted electricity, conductors may sag into trees under high-voltage lines, resulting in fires, line outages, equipment shutdowns and disruptions of electrical power. Vegetation methods currently used in this area are inadequate to prevent long-term regrowth of tall-growing species. For example, hand-cutting with chainsaws, combined with characteristics of climate and vegetation in this area, have led to rapid re-sprouting of certain species and a dense growth that is difficult and dangerous for clearing personnel to maintain. Frequent and costly treatments are required. The proposed action allows BPA to use a program of Integrated Vegetation Management to encourage establishment of low-growing species, and prevent, where possible, the occurrence of tall-growing vegetation that would interfere with safe, reliable operation of the transmission line. Discrete vegetative management zones along the right-of-way identify the combination of techniques, including manual, biological and chemical methods that would effectively control vegetation and meet environmental constraints within those zones. Herbicide application would be done with hand pumped backpack sprayers. Application methods would include treating cut-stumps, basal application (spraying the lower 6-8 inches of the plant stem), and spot-foliar (product applied to a small amount of foliage of a specific plant). No broadcast or aerial application would occur.

The only alternative action identified is the status quo, where BPA would continue to manually cut tall-growing vegetation, encouraging the increase of tall-growing vegetation and discouraging the establishment of low-growing species, with little opportunity to reach the goal of prevention.

During the 30-day public comment period which ended September 14, 1998, one comment letter was received. The sender, Hood River County Weed & Pest Division, noted that approval of the EA, and the opportunity to use integrated methods on federal

lands under BPA lines... “would both benefit the Federal program and give a broad spectrum control program for all lands within Hood River County. Without the EA noxious weeds will be virtually impossible to control on Federal lands....” The Forest Service, NSA office asked that two items in the EA be corrected. *(See the attached Errata Sheet for those changes to the EA.)*

Potential impacts of the proposed action are: 1) changes in the vegetation composition on the right-of-way from tall-growing species to low-growing species; noxious weed control; low risk of impact to sensitive/endemic species from trampling, felling trees, and herbicide application. 2) Temporary disturbance of wildlife every 2-3 years when workers are present; some herbicides may be hazardous or slightly toxic to some species. 3) Slight run-off and localized erosion would recur until low-growing vegetation is established. Slight sedimentation potential for water resources. 4) Moderate risk to workers of reproductive or general health effects from backpack sprayers using 3 of the 4 proposed herbicide formulations.

There are several reasons why these impacts would not be significant. First, changes in the vegetation from tall growing to natural low-growing species would allow BPA to visit the area less often, thereby reducing trampling, tree-felling and herbicide application, as fewer and fewer tall-growing vegetative species resprout. Noxious weed species along roadways would be treated, reducing the spread of noxious weeds. Fewer treatment visits by workers would result in less disturbance of wildlife, fewer intrusions into areas of sensitive/endemic plant species, and fewer occurrences of erosion off slopes when workers traverse them. Worker safety would increase with the use of herbicides, as the need for manual cutting is reduced, and the need for the herbicide treatment diminishes over time as natural low-growing vegetation becomes established.

The 4 herbicides allowed for use on federal lands are of very low toxicity and do not bioaccumulate. Only workers licensed and trained in the safe handling of herbicides would apply the chemicals. The specific wildlife species which could be affected by the

herbicides are not found in the right-of-way area. Buffer areas and seasonal treatment restrictions for sensitive/endemic plant habitats would be identified on zonal treatment maps for workers to follow. The low- volume and velocity of the backpack sprayers, and the specific nature of the application methods allow only the target species to be treated. No impacts are expected on cultural resources, air quality, water quality, visual and recreational resources, or the unique environmental resources of the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area.

Determination: Based on the information in the EA, as summarized here, BPA determines that the proposed action is not a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment within the meaning of NEPA, 42 U.S.C. 4321 et seq. Therefore, an EIS will not be prepared and BPA is issuing this FONSI.

Issued in Portland, Oregon, on September 24, 1998.

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Alexandra B. Smith, Vice President,
Environment, Fish and Wildlife Group