

6450-01-P

DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY

Bonneville Power Administration

Finding of No Significant Impact for
Hellsgate Winter Range: Wildlife Mitigation Project

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

ACTION: Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI).

SUMMARY: BPA proposes to fund the Hellsgate Winter Range: Wildlife Mitigation Project (Project) in a cooperative effort with the Colville Confederated Tribes and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). The Project is intended to mitigate for wildlife and wildlife habitat adversely affected by the construction of Grand Coulee and Chief Joseph Dams and their reservoirs. The Project would allow the sponsors to secure land and conduct wildlife habitat improvement and long-term management activities within the boundaries of the Colville Indian Reservation. BPA has prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) (DOE/EA-0940) evaluating the potential environmental effects of the proposed Project (Alternative B) and No Action (Alternative A). Protection and re-establishment of riparian and upland habitat on the Colville Indian Reservation, under Alternative B, would not have a significant adverse environmental impact because: (1) there would be only limited, mostly short-term adverse impacts on soils, water quality, air quality, vegetation, and wildlife (including no effect on endangered species); and (2) there would be no adverse effect on water quantity, cultural resources, or land use. 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 AND COPIES OF THE EA, CONTACT: Robert Shank,
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3621, phone number 503-230-5115, fax number 503-230-3752; Joe DeHerrera, Bonneville Power Administration - EWP, P.O. Box 3621, Portland, Oregon, 97208-3621, telephone 503-231-6971; or the Public Involvement Office voice/TTY 503-230-3478 in Portland, or toll-free 1-800-622-4519, fax number 503-230-3752.

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: Under provisions of the Pacific Northwest Electric Power Planning and Conservation Act of 1980, BPA has the authority and obligation to fund wildlife mitigation activities that are consistent with the Northwest Power Planning Council's (Council) Fish and Wildlife Program (Program). In 1989, the Council amended its Program to include assessments of wildlife habitat losses resulting from construction of Grand Coulee and Chief Joseph Dams. Consistent with Section 1003(7) of the Program's Wildlife Mitigation Rule, BPA proposes to fund projects that are intended to help reach the Council's wildlife mitigation goals. In 1990, the Council reviewed and approved the Colville Confederated Tribe's proposed, "Hellgate Winter Range: Wildlife Mitigation Project." BPA funding would allow the Colville Confederated Tribes to secure land within the Reservation for wildlife habitat and to improve, maintain, and monitor site-specific conditions to increase wildlife habitat values. In the long-term, the key objectives of improving wildlife habitat values in the project area are dependent on how effectively project area microclimate conditions can be changed to benefit both plant and wildlife species.

Under Alternative B, the proposed action, adverse effects on the physical environment including soils, air, and water, would be mostly short-term. Restoration of former wetlands and riparian areas near existing water bodies may cause soil rutting and compaction, and temporarily increase soil transport and stream sedimentation. These impacts would be limited to construction sites and would be addressed as necessary to remain within Federal and Tribal permit requirements. Suspending commercial timber harvest, road construction, and livestock grazing would reduce soil disturbance, slow the spread of noxious weeds, and decrease soil erosion in

both the near and long-term. Dust, smoke, and vehicle engine emissions would decrease from present levels and ambient air quality would improve. Although slash burning and prescribed burning of vegetation could temporarily reduce air quality in localized areas, smoke quantity would be limited by the careful timing and distribution of burning activities. Over time, burning levels should decline as desirable wildlife habitat conditions are reached and outdoor burning requirements are lessened.

Observable changes in surface water quantity are not expected, although increased amounts of vegetation in project area watersheds could result in reduced peak streamflows and longer streamflow periods. Habitat protection and revegetation activities in upland and riparian zones would result in reduced levels of sediment loading in project area streams. This should contribute locally to an increase in overall surface water quality.

With a slowing in the rate of spread of noxious weeds, the amount of chemical herbicide applications necessary to control them would be limited. Chemical use is expected to decrease dramatically as desirable plant communities expand and shade out weedy plant species. All chemical herbicide and fertilizer applications would be coordinated with Colville Agency, BIA-Lands Operations, to ensure adverse effects on non-targeted species or transportation of chemicals to ground or surface water are avoided.

Adverse effects of restoration or maintenance actions on the existing biological resources in the project area, such as native vegetation and wildlife species, are expected to be short-term and localized in nature. Weed control and other revegetation efforts would take place only in areas that have been disturbed in the past, through timber harvesting or grazing practices, or in areas with large non-native and noxious weed (plant) communities. Long-term native vegetation benefits would be provided because all age classes of trees and other native plant species would be protected and increased over time. Controlled burning would be beneficial for regeneration of fire sprouting plant species. Fire suppression activities would provide protection for fire sensitive plant species, such as bitterbrush, which are used as primary food sources by wintering deer populations.

Securing and enhancing land for wildlife purposes would provide immediate and long-term benefits for wildlife populations. Near-term disturbance of wildlife could be offset within one growing season by the greatly increased habitat values. Bald eagle, gray wolf, and peregrine falcon are the only Federally listed species that may occur in the project area. To date, neither gray wolves nor peregrine falcons have been observed in the project area vicinity. Two bald eagle nests, however, are located adjacent to the project area and wintering bald eagles are commonly observed. Public access near these areas would be limited to reduce potential adverse disturbance effects on nesting bald eagles. Over time, an increase of bald eagle foraging and nesting sites could result as the old-growth forest and riparian habitat conditions improve. An increase in prey species would benefit the Federally listed species, by increasing their food sources. The majority of habitat enhancement work would occur from late April through October, a time when wintering bald eagles are not present in the project vicinity. In a letter dated September 15, 1994, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concurred with BPA's determination that the Project would not adversely affect the bald eagle, gray wolf, or peregrine falcon.

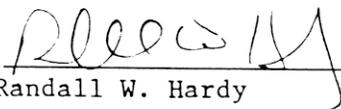
No listed cultural resource sites are known to exist in the project area although it is possible that undiscovered sites exist. Surveys would be used to determine which areas must be totally avoided because of their historic or cultural importance to the Colville Confederated Tribes. If sites were discovered during pre-construction surveys or during construction activities, strict procedures would be followed to ensure that damage to important cultural resources would be avoided. Therefore, no effects on cultural resources would be expected.

Long-term land use changes would occur in the project area as ownership is transferred from willing (private) landowners to Federal and Tribal entities. Land management practices would change from more market driven timber harvesting and livestock grazing activities to those that would enhance and support wildlife values. Adverse social and economic effects are not expected, however, for the following reasons: existing Tribal timber program, grazing lease, or other revenues are not derived from project area (fee patent) lands; existing U.S. Department of Agriculture, Conservation Reserve Program, contracts that compensate private land owners, for

reducing soil erosion risks, could transfer to Tribal entities; BPA funding would offset Project acquisitions and provide for wildlife enhancement activities and long-term operation and maintenance of them; and a reduction of less than one percent of Ferry or Okanogan County's budget could be attributed to the fee patent to Tribal trust status land conversions. Prime and unique farmland designations would not change or be affected by wildlife enhancement and management activities because the land could be converted back to farm use if required by the declaration of a national emergency. Although there would be permanent and seasonal road closures, no adverse effects would be expected because previous public access has been limited due to the private ownership of the project area. Although permanent closures of some primitive roads could further decrease the level of motorized activities in localized areas, road surfaces would be retained for emergency fire access and would not be ripped or re-contoured. Seasonal BIA Forest Road closures would occur during the peak of eagle, deer, and elk winter use. Due to little or no recreational use adjacent to the project area during the winter season, adverse effects of road closures on winter recreation should be minimal.

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 March 23, 1995.


Randall W. Hardy
Administrator and Chief Executive Officer
Bonneville Power Administration