

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy



Proposed Action: North Fork Walla Walla River RM 5.2-6.5 Floodplain Restoration

Project No.: 2007-396-00

Project Manager: Jennifer Lord – EWU - 4

Location: Umatilla County, Oregon

Categorical Exclusion Applied (from 10 C.F.R. Part 1021): B1.20 Protection of cultural resources, fish and wildlife habitat

Description of the Proposed Action: Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) proposes to fund the Walla Walla Basin Watershed Council to implement a river habitat and floodplain restoration project along about 1.5 miles of the North Fork Walla Walla River (NFWWR). The proposed actions would restore ecological function, and improve channel and floodplain connectivity, water quality, and habitat for Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed species (including spring Chinook salmon, steelhead, and bull trout). Funding the proposed activities would support conservation of ESA-listed species considered in the 2020 ESA consultation with the National Marine Fisheries Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on the operation and maintenance of the Columbia River System, while also supporting ongoing efforts to mitigate for effects of the Federal Columbia River Power System (FCRPS) 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.).

Project activities would include the below actions:

- **Wood Structure Installation:** Approximately 40 log jams and apex jams would be installed in the river channel, side channels, and alcoves, while the remaining 29 pinned logs would be placed in the floodplain. Log structures ranging from approximately 15 to 40 feet in length would be embedded up to 6 feet in depth, backfilled, then ballasted with habitat boulders or log pins. Wood structures would provide habitat, reduce water velocity, encourage floodplain and channel connectivity, and exclude cattle from entering the riparian areas. Prior to construction, best management practices (BMP) would be used to isolate the work zone and control sediment and erosion.
- **Side Channel Activation and Alcove Enhancement:** Grading activities would occur in select locations to activate relic side channels and floodplains and to expand an existing wetland alcove. Side channels approximately 5 feet wide, ranging from 30 to 150 feet in length, would be graded to reduce up to five feet in channel elevation. The alcove would be graded approximately 40 feet wide, 350 feet in length, and up to 5 feet in depth. Excavated material would be used in other project activities.
- **Riparian Vegetation Planting:** An estimated total of 3,300 feet of willow trenches would be incorporated in the process of wood structure installation and floodplain roughening.

Trenches would be approximately three to four feet in depth, once in place, and the cuttings would be backfilled with excavated material. Live cuttings would also be planted on and around all wood structures and throughout the roughened floodplain. Established vegetation would be flagged for protection and vegetation removed during construction would be salvaged and replanted within the project site. Disturbed areas previously vegetated would be planted or reseeded with native species.

The project would occur within an Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) approved work window, during low flow conditions when ESA-listed fish species are least likely to be present. The construction equipment used would include but is not limited to pick-up trucks, dump trucks, vibratory drivers, backhoes, excavators, power tools, and hand tools. All materials used in the restoration would be repurposed directly from the site or sourced from a local vendor. The site would be accessed by existing access roads and designated paths. Staging and stockpiling areas would be designated and flagged.

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 *DOE National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), Implementing Procedures* (dated June 30, 2025), 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. ¹

Lindsey Mills
Environmental Protection Specialist

Concur:

Katey C. Grange
NEPA Compliance Officer

Attachment(s): Environmental Checklist

¹ BPA is aware that the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), on February 25, 2025, issued an interim final rule to remove its NEPA implementing regulations at 40 C.F.R. Parts 1500–1508. Based on CEQ guidance, and to promote completion of its NEPA review in a timely manner and without delay, in this CX BPA is voluntarily relying on the CEQ regulations, in addition to the interim final rule to revise DOE NEPA regulations implementing NEPA at 10 C.F.R. Part 1021 and NEPA Implementing Procedures (dated June 30, 2025), to meet its obligations under NEPA, 42 U.S.C. §§ 4321 et seq.

Categorical Exclusion Environmental Evaluation

This checklist 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.

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Project Site Description

The North Fork Walla Walla River (NFWWR) flows from its headwaters in the coniferous forested, western slopes of the Blue Mountains in northeast Oregon. The proposed project site is located in the valley bottom at 1,700 feet, approximately 10 miles south of Milton-Freewater, Oregon in Umatilla County. The project would occur on approximately 34.7 acres of private property along 1 mile of the NFWWR. Past land management activities included grazing, timber harvesting, debris removal, and channel modification such as improvised push-up dams, which has left the project reach ecologically non-functional. Additionally, the diminished river function has increased the severity of damage caused by high flow events. Although a stand of mature deciduous trees and some riparian tree species remain intact, high flow events have caused substantial topsoil and riparian vegetation loss. Approximately eight acres of wetland were identified within the project area by the National Wetland Inventory (NWI) spatial data and a wetland survey was conducted for the NFWWR restoration project by Ecosystem Science, LLC on March 31, 2023.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: BPA made a determination of no adverse effect to historic properties on August 12, 2025 (BPA CR Project No.: OR 2025 016, SHPO Case No.: 24-1888). BPA received no comments from the Nez Perce Tribe, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, and the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation within the 30-day consultation period. Oregon State Historic Office concurred with BPA's finding of no adverse effect for the proposed project, provided the identified sites are avoided by project activities

Notes:

- Avoid identified sites and implement a with a 100-foot buffer around the sites.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The installation of large wood structures, side channel activation, and planting of riparian vegetation would disturb soils on the project site. Best Management Practices (BMP) have been developed to avoid or minimize temporary fine sediment impacts during construction. All ground disturbance would be stabilized and monitored throughout the length of implementation. The proposed project is expected to reduce water velocity, support soil stabilizing riparian vegetation growth, and promote the natural regeneration of topsoil. Overall, the project would have a positive impact on geology and soils in the long term.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No ESA-listed or special-status plant species are known to exist in the project area. Areas impacted by the NFWWR restoration project would be restored by re-seeding and planting native vegetation to stabilize topsoils, prevent introduction of invasive species, and improve habitat quality for both aquatic life and wildlife. Overall, this project would have a positive impact on vegetation conditions in the long term.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: According to US Fish and Wildlife Service's IPaC, presence of the gray wolf (ESA-listed endangered) may be possible in this region and the project reach is located within an area ODFW has designated as "Area of Known Wolf Activity" in Umatilla County. According to the project sponsor and long-time landowners, no wolf activity has been observed in or near the project area. Additionally, encounters at the project site would be highly unlikely as gray wolves are nocturnal and generally avoid human populated areas. Presence of a migratory USFWS Bird of Conservation Concern (BCC) species, Rufous hummingbird, may be possible at the proposed project site (USFWS IPaC.gov). However, no sightings have been documented within a three-mile radius of the project site (Ebird.org). In addition, presence is unlikely due to the degraded nature of the project site. No other ESA or special-status species have been documented within or near the project area. No ESA-listed species would be impacted.

Non-listed wildlife in the project area would be disturbed by the effects of project activities, such as human presence and noise from equipment. Conservation measures would be used to minimize wildlife impacts. Wildlife that could be temporarily displaced during implementation would likely reoccupy the site following completion of the proposed activities. The proposed river restoration project is expected to improve aquatic and riparian habitat, which would have a beneficial effect to wildlife species in the long term.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The NFWWR restoration project would permanently alter a portion of the waterway and would temporarily disrupt aquatic life. Impacts to ESA-listed species, including steelhead, spring Chinook, and bull trout would be covered under the BPA's programmatic Habitat Improvement Program (HIP) biological opinion with the USFWS and NMFS. Construction activities would have temporary effects such as increased turbidity, habitat disturbances, and increased physiological stress to aquatic life. The project would be constructed during low flow and BMPs would be implemented to minimize impacts such as soil erosion, excess sediment downstream, and turbidity. Construction would be paused during runoff events. Work zone isolation and fish passage techniques would be used as needed but due to low-flow conditions, presence of ESA-listed fish or other species would be unlikely. In the long term, this project would improve water quality and habitat for ESA-listed and non-listed aquatic species.

The Walla Walla Basin Watershed Council (WWBWC) would obtain the following permits prior to implementation:

- Clean Water Act Section 401 Water Quality Certification from the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality
- Clean Water Act Section 404 permit under the Regional General Permit 6 from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
- Zone Permit from the Umatilla County Department of Land Use Planning
- Removal-Fill Permit from the Oregon Department of State and Lands
- Fish Passage Approval from ODFW

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Ground disturbance during the NFWWR restoration project would remove and crush wetland vegetation and soils in the wetlands on the project site. The proposed project is designed to promote main channel and floodplain connectivity, which would likely increase inundation within the floodplain and wetlands. Overall, the project would improve wetland function, abundance, and ecological value.

WWBWC would obtain Sections 404 and 401 permits prior to implementation.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Although there would be ground disturbance as a result of the NFWWR restoration project, the work is not expected to substantially affect groundwater and aquifers. Groundwater recharge and water table levels would potentially improve as a result of increased water storage throughout the floodplain and wetland. The proposed project would either have no effect or a positive effect on groundwater and water tables.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No change in land use would occur as a result of the proposed NFWWR restoration project. The project is located on private agricultural land with a small water diversion. The water diversion system would remain unaffected, and the landowner would maintain water rights. The proposed restoration project, both during construction and upon completion, would not impact any public use or recreation activities. Recreational opportunities in the upper NFWWR are very limited due to extreme low flows and habitat degradation. Additionally, the property is private with no public access.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed NFWWR restoration project would have temporary and permanent changes to the landscape. Visual changes due to materials and equipment staging, vegetation disturbances, and human presence would be minor and short-term. Upon completion, changes such as increased riparian habitat, wetlands, and natural waterway structures would be permanent and overall improve visual quality. Approximately 0.9 miles of the NFWWR and surrounding habitat would be permanently changed and restored to more natural conditions.

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 during construction. Normal conditions would resume immediately once the project is completed.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed work would result in a temporary increase in ambient noise. Any noise emitted from construction equipment would be short-term and temporary, occurring only 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 as a result of the proposed project.

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: The Walla Walla Basin Watershed Council, Jacobs Engineering Group Inc., and Cramer Fish Science developed and agreed upon the proposed actions collaboratively with the landowner. Construction schedules and mobilization of heavy equipment would be coordinated with the landowners.

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

Signed:

Lindsey Mills, ECF-4
Environmental Protection Specialist