

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy



Proposed Action: Wenas Wildlife Area Wildfire Recovery Reseeding

Project No.: 2006-004-00

Project Manager: Victoria Bohlen, EWU-4

Location: Kittitas and Yakima Counties, Washington

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

Description of the Proposed Action: Bonneville proposes to fund Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) to reseed areas affected by wildfires that burned several thousand acres of Wenas Wildlife Area during arid, late-summer months in 2019 and 2020. This funding would be part of BPA's mitigation obligation to compensate for wildlife and habitat losses resulting from the construction of Grand Coulee, McNary, and John Day dams. Funding the proposed activities also fulfills ongoing commitments under the 2020 National Marine Fisheries Service Columbia River System Biological Opinion (2020 NMFS CRS BiOp), while also supporting ongoing efforts to mitigate for effects of the 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.).

WDFW would seed approximately 1,000 acres over 3 years, with the majority of that area (approximately 850 acres) occurring in the first year. The seed mix would be a combination of native forbs and grasses. Treatment areas would focus on drainages and draws that experienced the highest intensity burns, where native vegetation has been lost, and where erosion of soil into waterways is a concern. The majority of the seeding would be done aurally by helicopter due to limited road access, steepness of the slopes, and the large size and contiguous nature of the burned areas along drainages. Roughly 350 acres would be broadcast or drill seeded in November or December so that winter/spring precipitation can facilitate germination and establishment of the seeds. Sagebrush seeds would be aurally seeded in January or February.

Findings: In accordance with Section 1021.410(b) 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), BPA has determined that the proposed action:

- 1) fits within a class of actions listed in Appendix B of 10 CFR 1021, Subpart D (see attached Environmental Checklist);
- 2) does not present any extraordinary circumstances that may affect the significance of the environmental effects of the proposal; and
- 3) has not been segmented to meet the definition of a categorical exclusion.

Based on these determinations, BPA finds that the proposed action is categorically excluded from further NEPA review.

/s/ Carolyn Sharp

Carolyn Sharp
Environmental Protection Specialist

Concur:

/s/ Sarah T. Biegel November 17, 2020

Sarah T. Biegel Date
NEPA Compliance Officer

Attachment(s): Environmental Checklist

Categorical Exclusion Environmental Checklist

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

Much of the Wenas Wildlife Area is open, shrub-steppe at the lower elevations grading into broken timber, and near the crest transitions to mixed conifer stands. Present habitat conditions were influenced primarily by past agricultural practices, extensive livestock grazing, recreational use of the public lands, and fires. Past range fires have created a mosaic of grassland and shrubland habitats. Over the past thirty years, wildfires have burned much of the Wildlife Area, with some areas having burned more than once. As a result, much of the shrub habitat has been converted to grassland. Riparian bottoms have also burned multiple times and are currently recovering from fire disturbance and past livestock grazing.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: WA SHPO concurrence on no adverse effect determination was received on September 29, 2020 (WA 2020 109). The Yakama Nation and Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation (CTCR) were also consulted. No response was received from the Yakama Nation. CTCR stated no concern with the proposed action.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be no negative effects to soils. Some disturbance of the top few inches of soil may occur where drill seeders are used; however, seeding would take place in areas already disturbed by wildfire and wildfire response actions, such as creation of fire breaks. Establishment of vegetation would help stabilize soils and prevent erosion. Aerial application of seeds would occur on soils with steep slopes.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Effects to plant species would be beneficial. Native sagebrush, forbs, and grasses would be reseeded in areas that have lost native vegetation to wildfires, preventing invasive and non-native plants from colonizing disturbed areas.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Loss of vegetation from the wildfires has reduced cover and forage materials for resident wildlife including elk, deer, big horn sheep, sage grouse, and small range land birds and mammals. Equipment used to lay down seed (helicopters, drill seeders, vehicles) may cause temporary disturbance to wildlife, but establishment of native vegetation in areas that have lost vegetation to wildfires would provide a long-term benefit to wildlife that use the Wildlife Area. Seeding would also take place during winter months outside of nesting and breeding activities.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The proposed action would not involve any in-water work or impact to water bodies or fish. Federally-listed steelhead occupy streams in the Umtanum Creek subbasin. Aerial seeding in this watershed would help re-establish vegetative cover and prevent soil erosion into the stream that would otherwise degrade the fish habitat.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be no effect to wetlands. Riparian areas would be reseeded by aerial methods. Vehicles and heavy equipment would not be operated in wetland areas.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be no effect to groundwater or aquifers. Ground disturbance would be limited to the top few inches of soil, or not at all where aerial seeding is the method of seed dispersal.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be no change in land use. No specially-designated areas are present.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be little to no effect on visual quality. Revegetation of burned areas would have a long-term beneficial effect and accelerate the natural recruitment of vegetation.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: A small amount of emissions may occur temporarily during seeding associated with helicopter or vehicle use. There would be no lasting effect on air quality.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be noise associated with use of seeding equipment (helicopters, drill seeders, vehicles), but disturbance would be temporary and limited to winter months when public use of the Wildlife Area is low.

12. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: All workers implementing the project would follow OSHA guidelines. Helicopter pilots would be licensed and follow FAA guidelines. Public access has been closed or restricted to several areas affected by the wildfires. Seeding would also take place during winter months when public use is low.

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: Project would be implemented by WDFW public lands owned and managed by WDFW. WDFW notifies the public of closures and other restrictions associated with management activities.

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

Signed: /s/ Carolyn Sharp November 17, 2020
Carolyn Sharp, ECF-4 Date
Environmental Protection Specialist