

# Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration  
Department of Energy



**Proposed Action:** Operations and Maintenance at Hellsgate Big Game Winter Range 2020-2021 (*update to previous Categorical Exclusion issued on September 30, 2020*)

**Project No.:** 1992-048-00

**Project Manager:** Sandra Fife, EWM-4

**Location:** Ferry County and Okanogan County, WA

**Categorical Exclusion Applied (from Subpart D, 10 C.F.R. Part 1021):** B1.20 Protection of cultural resources, fish and wildlife habitat; B1.3 Routine maintenance

**Description of the Proposed Action:** Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) proposes to fund the Colville Confederated Tribes (CCT) to perform ongoing routine operations and maintenance (O&M) on its wildlife management areas/mitigation units comprising nearly 62,000 acres on the Colville Indian Reservation in north-central Washington (collectively known as the Hellsgate Big Game Winter Range Project) through February 2021. Funding the proposed activities would serve as partial mitigation for the loss of fish and wildlife habitat due to the construction and operation of the Grand Coulee and Chief Joseph Dams on the Columbia River system, under the provisions of the Pacific Northwest Electric Power Planning and Conservation Act of 1980 (Northwest Power Act) (16 U.S.C. (USC) 839 et seq.). This categorical exclusion is an update to the September 30, 2020 version to address proposed aerial seeding activities as part of the invasive species control activities.

Field sites would be accessed using pickup trucks, all-terrain vehicles, utility terrain vehicles, trailers, and tractors. Ponds and wet meadow are present on various properties within Hellsgate wildlife mitigation units. These areas would be avoided, and activities in these locations are restricted. Proposed actions are as follows:

## **Road Maintenance**

Existing access roads on each mitigation unit would be maintained for public safety, erosion control, and reduced vehicle maintenance. Roads would be surveyed and evaluated to determine ease of public access. All road maintenance would occur within the existing road prism and would include mowing access roads with a tractor and rotary mower to reduce the spread of invasive species and reduce fire danger during dry periods by keeping vegetation heights low. Gravel would be added to potholes and on areas with very fine sand where the road gets soft when dry in order to maintain the surface condition. Existing kiosks at access roads would be updated with information at each mitigation unit. These kiosks inform the public of access changes and any relevant management information.

## **Building Maintenance**

Buildings and grounds on mitigation units would be maintained to protect both worker and public health and safety. Areas to be maintained would include office buildings, field stations, shops, barns, sheds, storage areas, and parking lots, and would involve electrical repairs, lighting repairs, and other in-building needs, as well as mowing and trimming vegetation and adding gravel to fill in low spots with water ponds. No new construction or ground disturbance would occur.

## **Debris Removal**

Wildlife mitigation units would be cleared of abandoned cars, farm equipment, debris, and old boundary fencing that is no longer in use and is a risk to wildlife safety and access. This would not include removal of historic structures or objects, meaning anything greater than 50 years in age. Items would be loaded into a dump trailer or lifted by a tractor bucket.

## **Fence Construction/Maintenance and Trespass Livestock Monitoring/Removal**

Wildlife-friendly Buck-n-Pole fencing would be constructed in place of existing barbed wire fencing for the purposes of excluding trespass livestock, curbing the spread of noxious weeds, and allowing natural vegetation to grow to reduce the impacts from erosion. The fences would also protect sharp-tailed grouse nesting, rearing and wintering habitat, and protect critical winter range for mule deer, white-tailed deer, and elk using these areas. Buck-n-Pole fencing would consist of two 4 to 5-inch (in) diameter treated wood posts separated by two 4-in diameter wood stakes split-screwed into the posts.

Existing fence lines would be evaluated and repaired as needed to include fixing line breaks, clearing lines of debris, replacing clips and staples, marking fences, replacing broken or missing posts, replacing old gates, and repairing sections of old fence. Approximately 280 miles of boundary fence would be maintained each year.

The CCT would monitor mitigation units for trespassing livestock and notify livestock owners when appropriate. If necessary, temporary corrals would be erected and livestock would be driven into the corrals by chasing or baiting with salt blocks; loaded into a livestock trailer; and transported to the Bureau of Indian Affairs' (BIA) range impound lot.

## **Invasive Species Control**

Past land use practices have resulted in noxious weed infestations on lands previously inhabited by native vegetation. Invasive species management would follow the CCT Wildlife Mitigation Integrated Weed Management Plan for Wildlife Management Areas. Invasive species management methods would include chemical control (herbicides), mechanical control (mowing, disking), physical control (hand pulling, chopping, bagging), biological control (insects, plant disease), and cultural control (planting competitive vegetation). Treated areas would be seeded and planted with native vegetation to eliminate future invasive species encroachment and prevent erosion. Planting methods would include hand planting; hand seeding; no-till rangeland drilling, in which a coulter would cut a narrow opening in the soil approximately one to two inches deep, and a set of double disc openers would open the soil approximately one inch wide and deposit a seed into the opening; and aerial seeding of 650 acres in the Tumwater Basin Wildlife Management Area to rehabilitate areas that were burned by wildfire, which reduced forage and cover. Aerial seeding would be carried out using a helicopter with a broadcast seeder mounted to the bottom. A field used for seeding native species for conservation efforts located approximately 0.7 miles west of the WMA would be used as a staging area for the fuel truck and other vehicles to fill the seeder and fuel the helicopter. The staging area would be approximately two acres in size and

would be accessible by road from the Cameron Lake county road. The helicopter would depart the staging area to the seeding area, dispersing seed from the broadcast seeder. A total of 3,500 pounds of seed would be applied at five to six pounds per acre. Aerial seeding would take one to two days to complete. Following seed deposition, press wheels would push the soil back down over the seed to ensure sufficient seed-to-soil contact.

**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/ Mandy Hope

Mandy Hope  
Contract Environmental Protection Specialist  
ACS Professional Staffing

Reviewed by:

/s/ Chad Hamel

Chad Hamel  
Supervisory Environmental Protection Specialist

Concur:

/s/ Katey C. Grange                      January 27, 2021  
Katey C. Grange                      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.

**Proposed Action:** Operations and Maintenance at the Hellsgate Big Game Winter Range 2020-2021

## **Project Site Description**

Most of the sites within Hellsgate Big Game Winter Range lie along the Columbia River. Habitat types vary greatly among wildlife mitigation units and include coniferous forests, riparian areas, shrub-steppe, grasslands, and agricultural areas. The main cover type in the project area is shrub-steppe comprised predominantly of bitterbrush (*Purshia tridentate*), sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*), rabbitbrush (*Chrysothamnus nauseosus*), cactus (*Opuntia Fragilus*), serviceberry (*Amelanchier alnifolia*), and current (*Ribes cereum*). Riparian areas associated with close proximity to the Columbia River are comprised of alder (*Alnus*), cottonwood (*Populus*), red-osier dogwood (*Cornus sericea*), hawthorn (*Crataegus*), willow (*Salix*), water birch (*Betula occidentalis*), serviceberry, chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*), smooth sumac (*Rhus glabra*), blueberry elder (*Sambucus caerulea*), snowberry (*Symphoricarpos*), and rose (*Rosa*). In many areas, the habitat has been altered by high levels of cattle and horse grazing associated with past ranching activities.

## **Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources**

### **1. Historic and Cultural Resources**

Potential for Significance: No with conditions

Explanation: The CCT Tribal Historic Preservation Office (THPO) concurred with BPA's determination of No Historic Properties Affected on 9/3/20 and again on 12/23/20 following additional consultation for the aerial seeding action.

Note:

- The CCT would adhere to the Inadvertent Discovery Protocol provided by the THPO. Additionally, the CCT would protect, by avoidance, the known cultural resources site 45OK850 during aerial seeding.

### **2. Geology and Soils**

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Temporary increase in soil displacement would occur during planting activities. The depth of soil disturbance would not exceed two inches. Planting and seeding locations would be backfilled and tamped. Road maintenance would have long-term positive impacts due to decreasing erosion potential.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No known occurrences of Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed or sensitive plant species have been recorded within Hellsgate wildlife mitigation units. Potential short-term negative impacts to native plant species during proposed invasive species control. Long-

term positive impacts anticipated due to native plants reestablishing following invasive species control and planting. Potential short-term negative impacts to plants trampled during debris removal, fence construction, and trespass livestock removal. Negative impacts to native vegetation at the helicopter/equipment staging area for aerial seeding would be short term, as the project would occur during the winter months when the plants are dormant. The remaining actions would not have an effect on plant species.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) is documented within the project area. In 2011, Gray wolf was federally delisted in the eastern one-third of Washington, including the Colville Indian Reservation. The CCT Wildlife Population Division maintains contact with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife to determine whether project sites are within one mile of a wolf den or rendezvous site. There are no known denning sites within one mile of any CCT wildlife mitigation units. No ESA-listed or other sensitive species are located near the wildlife management areas.

Building and grounds maintenance and debris removal would be confined to existing infrastructure footprints in areas where wolves would not be expected to be present. Any impacts to wolves or any non-listed wildlife species during implementation of invasive species management would be limited to the immediate treatment sites, where there would be a temporary, small decrease in available habitat and temporary elevated noise disturbance.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: ESA-listed bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) and bull trout critical habitat, Chinook salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*), and steelhead (*O. mykiss*) have the potential to occur in the project area (USFWS IPaC Consultation Code 01EWF00-2020-SLI-1470). No known occurrences of bull trout have been recorded within Hellsgate wildlife mitigation units. Chinook salmon and steelhead have been observed adjacent to the westernmost wildlife mitigation units. Invasive species control and boundary fence construction are covered under BPA's Endangered Species Act (ESA) Section 7 consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) for BPA's Habitat Improvement Program (HIP) (HIP Project Notification No. 2020049). The remaining actions would occur in upland areas and would not have an effect on fish species.

Note:

- The CCT would adhere to all conservation measures for invasive plant control identified in the HIP consultation and approval.

#### **6. Wetlands**

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Removal, fill, or disturbance of native vegetation within wetland areas is not anticipated through ongoing O&M activities. Activities within or near wetlands would be limited to vegetation management, debris removal and in-kind fence replacement and would have positive long-term effects.

## 7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No new wells or use of groundwater proposed. The proposed action would not affect groundwater or the water table.

## 8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Existing land use would not change as a result of this project.

## 9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be no adverse effects to the visual quality of the environment as a result of this project.

## 10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Minor, temporary generation of emissions associated with increased vehicular traffic during field site access and road maintenance and helicopter traffic during aerial seeding would occur during project activities.

## 11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Minor, temporary noise increases associated with increased vehicular traffic during field site access and road maintenance, as well as helicopter noise during aerial seeding operations, would occur during project inspection activities.

## 12. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: All personnel would use best management practices to protect worker health and safety.

### **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 CCT owns the wildlife mitigation properties. No external coordination is needed to implement the proposed activities.

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

Signed: /s/ Mandy Hope January 27, 2021  
Mandy Hope, ECF-4 Date  
Contract Environmental Protection Specialist  
ACS Professional Staffing