

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy



Proposed Action: Ocean Survival of Salmonids Research Project

Project No.: 1998-014-00

Project Manager: Anne Creason – EWL-4

Location: Columbia River plume and coastal zones off Oregon and Washington

Categorical Exclusion Applied (from Subpart D, 10 C.F.R. Part 1021): B3.3 Research related to conservation of fish and wildlife

Description of the Proposed Action: Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) proposes to fund the National Marine Fisheries Service's (NMFS) Northwest Fisheries Science Center (NWFSC), the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission (PSMFC), and Oregon State University (OSU) to conduct a collaborative long-term monitoring and research project involving ecological surveillance and juvenile salmonid sampling in the Columbia River plume and coastal waters of the Pacific Northwest. The proposed actions would provide environmental data used to forecast coastal conditions and inform adaptive management and mitigation strategies to increase the survival of migrating juvenile salmonids. Funding the proposed activities fulfills 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.).

Together, NMFS and OSU would conduct two annual coastal survey cruises in May and June on a subcontracted vessel under the BPA-funded PSMFC contract. Over the course of 13 days, from Newport, Oregon, up to La Push, Washington, approximately 9 ocean transect lines would be surface trawled with mesh nets up to 30 meters deep. All nektonic species caught during trawling would be identified, measured, and weighed for ecological data collection. Captured focal-species (juvenile Chinook, sockeye, and steelhead) and forage fish (sardines, anchovy, herring) would be preserved for laboratory genetic, growth, and diet analysis. Non-focal species (e.g., adult salmonid, rockfish, eels, sturgeon, etc.) would be released post data collection. Adult salmonids with tags would be scanned and blood samples would be collected from yearlings for genetic and growth analysis. Zooplankton would be jarred for lab analysis to determine species and abundance. Oceanographic measurements such as salinity, temperature, oxygen, nutrients, and chlorophyll would be recorded throughout the duration of the cruises. To prevent disturbance or capture of seabirds and marine mammals during trawling, marine mammal and bird excluder devices would be used.

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/ Lindsey Arotin

Lindsey Arotin
Environmental Protection Specialist

Concur:

/s/ Sarah T. Biegel May 27, 2021

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.

Proposed Action: Ocean Survival of Salmonids Research Project

Project Site Description

Surveillance and sampling would occur 3 to 30 nautical miles (NM) west of the Pacific Northwest coastline between Newport, OR, and La Push, WA. The survey route would occupy both state territory and the Exclusive Economic Zone.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: BPA determined the proposed activities would have no potential to cause effects to historic properties. The proposed activities would not result in ground disturbance that could potentially impact archaeological resources. No modifications to existing historic built resources are proposed. Trawling activities would be limited to the top 30 meters of the water column, and prior to conducting surveys, existing data such as navigation charts would be utilized to identify survey transect pathways that would avoid shipwrecks.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No ground disturbance would occur as a result of the proposed coastal surveillance. Therefore, there would be no impact to geology and soils.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No ground or vegetation-disturbing activities would occur during surveillance; all work would occur on an ocean vessel or in laboratories.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No ground disturbances or permanent habitat alterations are proposed. Short-term disturbances would occur due to human and ocean vessel presence. Precautions and avoidance measures would be taken to avoid marine mammals and seabirds.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: ESA-listed species are present, and handling and take would occur during surveillance and sampling activities. Captured focal-species salmonids (juvenile Chinook, coho, sockeye, chum, and steelhead), would be kept and preserved for analysis. Data would be collected from all species caught during sampling, blood samples would be collected from yearling salmonids, and all non-focal species (e.g., adult salmonids, sturgeon, eulachon, rockfish) would be released. A marine mammal excluder device would be used to prevent the capture of larger ESA-listed marine animals (e.g., sea lions, dolphins, sea turtles). The trawling vessel would generate turbidity, and nets would temporarily disturb aquatic wildlife. No floodplains or adjacent water bodies would be impacted.

NMFS and OSU would adhere to all applicable terms and conditions identified in the following federal ESA and state permits.

- Endangered Species Act (ESA) Section - 10 NMFS Scientific Collection Permit
- Washington State Collection Permit
- State of Oregon Scientific Take Permit

5. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No ground-disturbing activities are proposed and no wetlands are present; therefore, there would be no potential impacts to wetlands.

6. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No ground-disturbing activities that may affect groundwater or aquifers are proposed. All work would be carried out from an ocean vessel or in laboratory facilities.

7. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Access to ocean sampling sites would be from existing ocean networks and all activities would comply with federal, state, and local ocean use and maritime laws. Sampling would occur from about 5 NM to 30 NM, beyond state boundaries in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (3-200 NM).

8. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The coastal surveys would be infrequent, short-term, and would not differ from common vessel activity on the seascape. The proposed actions would cause minor and temporary impact to visual quality.

9. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: All work would be conducted from an ocean vessel or in laboratory facilities. A temporary increase of emissions from the ocean vessel would have a minor and short-term effect on air quality.

10. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: All work would be conducted on a silent stern trawling vessel or in laboratory facilities. Increase in ambient noise would be temporary and minimal.

11. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Workers carrying out research activities are trained in proper equipment management techniques. All crew members are certified in CPR and first aid and have undergone sea safety and cold-water survival training. The proposed activity is not considered hazardous nor would it result in any health or safety risks to the general public.

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: No notification necessary. All work would be carried out from an ocean vessel or in laboratory facilities.

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

Signed: /s/ Lindsey Arotin May 27, 2021
Lindsey Arotin, ECF - 4 Date
Environmental Protection Specialist