

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy



Proposed Action: Tectonic Radio Tower Installation (Update to previous CX issued on August 28, 2023)

Project No.: P01405

Project Manager: Vincent “Charley” Majors

Location: Custer County, Idaho

Categorical Exclusion Applied (from Subpart D, 10 C.F.R. Part 1021): B1.19 Microwave, meteorological and towers

Description of the Proposed Action: Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) proposes to install a new communications tower at the summit of Grouse Peak in Custer County, Idaho. BPA is currently collocated on the State of Idaho’s (SOI) radio tower on the summit of Grouse Peak South. BPA’s current ultra-high frequency (UHF) antennas are outdated and require replacement upgrades. The two existing UHF grid antennas, weighing 38 pounds each, would be replaced with two microwave drums, weighing approximately 254 pounds each. The existing SOI tower was evaluated to determine if it has the structural capacity to hold BPA’s new antennas. The SOI tower was determined to be over capacity by a BPA structural engineer. The new BPA microwave drums would have a higher wind load and increase stress on the tower and foundation. Therefore, BPA proposes to build a new 100-foot-tall lattice radio tower, approximately 100-feet east of the existing tower location.

This is an update to the previous CX that was issued on August 28, 2023. This CX has been updated to reflect additional access road improvements and some tree side limbing. Further, an additional species, wolverines, was listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, which required consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-see the Wildlife discussion in the attached Environmental Checklist.

BPA would install the new tower on a 30-foot by 30-foot concrete pad. The associated telecom equipment would be located in a new building with a 56-foot by 32-foot footprint, located north of the proposed tower. The new microwave drums would be installed on the new tower, along with a new 20-foot-tall UHF “whip” antenna for BPA’s Mobile Redi program. Three new 2,000-gallon propane tanks would be installed northeast of the proposed tower location. A new 15-foot-long ice-bridge would be installed and connected to the tower and the equipment building. There would be approximately 100 feet of trenching for fiber installation, from the new BPA equipment building to the existing SOI building, to the west. An additional 100 feet of trenching for power installation would occur from the BPA equipment building to an existing power pole, west of the project location. Staging for the project would occur in a 60-foot by 40-foot area, just northeast of the proposed tower facility, adjacent to the existing access road.

Post-construction vegetation restoration would occur at the site by storing approximately 40-cubic-yards of excavated topsoil from the project footprint. The topsoil would be stored on the northwest side of the project area. Upon construction completion, the stored topsoil, along with native plant seed collected from the site, would be redistributed in the undeveloped disturbed areas.

Minor improvements were previously made to the existing access road to support construction equipment and vehicles. The improvements consisted of installing a drain dip, widening two turn-around locations, and adding 1.6 inches of gravel to approximately 0.35 miles of access road between the two turnaround improvement areas. Additional access road improvements would consist of leveling the existing access road at some locations by grading the road surface and adding gravel to the existing road prism. Additional truck pullouts have been designated along the access road, along with a location to transfer concrete to a top loading concrete mixer.

Approximately 15 to 20 small Douglas fir trees were previously removed or modified (for the creation of habitat snags) to meet beam path requirements and safety setbacks from the tower and equipment building—this work was also included in the original CX for the project. Additional vegetation, consisting mainly of sagebrush, would be removed from the radio tower facility footprint and staging area, prior to construction. Minor side limbing of trees would occur to facilitate construction equipment getting to the site.

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.

Beth Belanger
Environmental Protection Specialist

Concur:

Katey C. Grange
NEPA Compliance Officer

Attachment: 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

The project is occurring in the Salmon-Challis National Forest in Custer County, Idaho. The location is near the summit of Grouse Peak South, which is currently developed with two radio towers and equipment buildings. Grouse Peak South is in Section 22 of Township 14 North, Range 20 East (Boise Meridian). The project site is at 8,385-feet in elevation. The shrub-steppe habitat at the project site is dominated by sagebrush (*Artemisia* sp.) with Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) trees encroaching from the south. In areas where sagebrush and Douglas fir are not present, low-growing native forbs exist.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: BPA initially conducted background research and an intensive field survey for the project in 2016 and submitted a survey report to consulting parties in 2017. No historic properties were documented as part of the original survey and no concerns were identified as a result of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) Section 106 consultation. Therefore, BPA determined that no historic properties would be affected.

Since that time, more refined project design led BPA to expand the Area of Potential Effects (APE) by 1.2 acres to accommodate soil stockpiling, tree removal, and equipment staging. In June 2023, BPA completed an archaeological survey of the expanded APE and has completed an addendum report to supplement the 2017 investigation. No archaeological resources were identified.

On July 21, 2023, BPA re-initiated consultation with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, Nez Perce Tribe, Northwestern Band of the Shoshone Nation, Shoshone Bannock Tribes of the Fort Hall Reservation, the Idaho State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), and the US Forest Service (USFS) Salmon-Challis National Forest. By agreement with the USFS, BPA is the lead federal agency implementing Section 106 of the NHPA. BPA concluded that implementation of the proposed undertaking remains the same as determined in 2017 and would result in no historic properties affected.

The Nez Perce Tribe responded on July 21, 2023, that the tribe would not be commenting on the project. The Idaho SHPO concurred with BPA's determination on August 23, 2023. No additional response was received within 30 days.

The BPA archaeologist conducted an additional review of the construction contractor's proposed road improvement areas and pullout locations and determined that these locations are in pre-disturbed areas where no cultural or historic resources have been documented during previous surveys.

Notes: Construction vehicles and equipment must stay on designated and approved road improvement areas that have been reviewed by the BPA archaeologist.

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No with Conditions

Explanation: The maximum depth of soil excavation would be 10 feet. There would be approximately 0.35 acres of permanent ground disturbance for this project and 0.35 acres of temporary disturbance, which would be revegetated after construction. An Erosion Control Plan would be implemented to prevent erosion and to stabilize soils after construction.

Notes:

- Approximately 40 cubic yards of topsoil shall be stockpiled from a depth of 4-inches from the project footprint for post-construction site restoration.
- Topsoil shall be collected when the soil is dry and before any construction equipment is driven over it.
- Topsoil shall be stockpiled in the designated location and stored in mounds no taller than 6 feet to limit anaerobic conditions.
- Topsoil that is stored over-winter shall be covered in plastic or hydro mulched without seeds, to reduce soil moisture and prevent weed establishment.
- When reapplying topsoil, avoid mixing topsoil with subsoil material.
- Disturbed areas shall be hydro mulched between construction seasons to stabilize the site and prevent erosion from wind, rain and snowmelt.

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

Potential for Significance: No with Conditions

Explanation: A plant survey was conducted on June 17 and July 24, 2017, which concluded that there are no Forest Service Sensitive listed plants in or around the project area. The USFS Region 4 sensitive species list was reviewed in 2023, and no new species have been added that were not previously surveyed for in the project area. Additionally, the plant survey included identification to species-level of all conifer trees and seedlings in the project area. The plant survey determined that there were no occurrences of the recently ESA-listed white bark pine (*Pinus albicaulis*), which was a candidate for listing at the time of the survey. Limber pines (*Pinus flexilis*), a close lookalike to white pines, were documented at the site and were positively identified by their cones which have distinctive characteristics. It was also determined during a recent site visit that the trees proposed for side limbing are also not white bark pine. No Federal/state special-status species or habitats would be impacted by the proposed project.

The USFS would provide ongoing restoration services, including monitoring, and adaptive management at the site after construction has been completed. To date the USFS has provided pre-construction invasive plant species control and collected native grass, forb, and shrub seeds from the site and surrounding area for post-construction revegetation. The native seed has been processed and is stored at a USFS facility. The presence of invasive cheat grass (*Bromus tectorum*) and other non-native plant species has been trending downwards since 2018, while native plant diversity has remained high at the site.

Topsoil would be collected and stored onsite to utilize the existing native seedbank for post-construction restoration activities.

Notes:

- See conditions above under #2 Geology and Soils
- Vehicles and equipment would be required to be cleaned and inspected by Forest Service personnel before entering Federal lands and before leaving paved roads, to avoid introduction of non-native, invasive plant species.
- The USFS Restoration Team would continue to be contracted to perform post-construction revegetation and site restoration.
- The USFS Restoration Team would perform site monitoring for three years after revegetation activities have been completed. Additional seeding, mulching, and noxious weed control would occur as needed throughout the three-year monitoring period.

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

Potential for Significance: No with Conditions

Explanation: A Biological Evaluation was completed in 2017, which included a review of the Salmon-Challis National Forest's sensitive species. The USFS Region 4 sensitive species list was reviewed in 2023, and no new species have been added that would be present in the project area. It was determined that the project would have no effect on Federal or state special status species or habitats.

The project site is designated as an Important Habitat Management Area for greater sage grouse.

In the fall of 2023, North American wolverine (*Gulo gulo luscus*) was listed as threatened under the endangered species Act. The project area may be considered suitable habitat for breeding and dispersing wolverines. On June 4, 2024, BPA submitted a biological assessment to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) with a determination of may affect but is not likely to adversely affect the species. On June 24, 2024, the USFWS provided a letter of concurrence with BPA's determination. No further action is needed.

Notes:

- In compliance with the USFS's requirements, the tower would have perch deterrents installed to prevent corvid predation on sage grouse.
- No work would be performed between March 1 and June 15, to avoid impacts to sage grouse hens and chicks.
- To protect nesting migratory birds, no vegetation removal would occur between April 15 and July 15, without first conducting a nest survey within the work area and within a 300-foot-radius of the work area, 10 days prior to vegetation removal. If nests are located, vegetation removal and noise disturbing activities shall not occur within a 300-foot-radius of the nest, until migratory bird nesting season has ended on July 15.
- All garbage shall be removed from the construction site to deter corvids.
- Construction holes and trenches shall be covered overnight to protect wildlife.

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

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The project site is on a mountain top, above several headwater streams of tributaries that drain into rivers that support migrating, spawning, and rearing of salmonid species and bull trout. The nearest tributary to the proposed tower location is 1,335-feet south. While no sediment is anticipated to reach any waterways from construction activities, an erosion control plan and best management practices would be implemented to prevent erosion from soil disturbance during construction.

Per FEMA, the site is in a Zone D, which is defined as an unstudied area where flood hazards are undetermined, but flooding is possible. The site is at high elevation and is unlikely to flood.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The project area does not contain any wetlands. A review of the National Wetland Inventory, soil information, topography, and aerial photos did not reveal any wetlands at the site. Additionally, two site visits were made during the summer of 2016 and wetland indicators were not noted within the project area.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The project would not impact groundwater or aquifers. The nearest EPA Sole Source Aquifer is 20-miles south of the project location.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be no changes to land use from the project. The project area is already in a USFS designated communications site. There would be no impact to specially-designated areas.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The tower installation would not significantly change the visual quality at this location because it is already developed with radio towers. A viewshed analysis was conducted to determine the extent of visual impacts and it was concluded that the addition of another tower would have minimal impacts to the visual quality of the landscape.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be a small amount of dust and vehicle emissions during construction; however, there would be no significant change to air quality during or after construction.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be temporary construction noise during daylight hours; however, operation noise would not significantly increase at the site.

12. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: There would be no impact to human health or safety. A site-specific safety plan would be prepared prior to construction implementation, which would include how to manage hazardous materials and would also provide a fire prevention and suppression plan, with detailed information on how to respond to emergency situations.

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: BPA has closely coordinated with the Salmon-Challis National Forest. The Forest provided a Decision Memo for the project, which included required design criteria and best management practices. BPA would continue to coordinate with the USFS prior to and during construction.

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

Signed:

Beth Belanger
Environmental Protection Specialist