

# Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration

Department of Energy



**Proposed Action:** Thompson Falls Radio Station VHF Radio System Upgrade

**Project No.:** P01237

**Project Manager:** Molly Kovaka, TEP-CSB-2

**Location:** Sanders County, MT

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

**Description of the Proposed Action:** BPA is proposing to replace the aging VHF radio system at its Thompson Falls Radio Station in Sanders County, Montana with a simple, modern VHF radio system. The replacement would help improve voice coverage across BPA's service area.

A grounding bar and lightning protection equipment would be installed in the communication building and would be bonded to the existing grounding ring within the station yard. Hand-excavation of up to five 18-inch-deep holes to perform the grounding ring bonding and any needed repairs to the ring would be the only ground-disturbing activities for the project.

Components of the existing interior charger rack would be replaced or upgraded to accommodate new equipment. Electronic equipment supporting the radio system *backhaul* data network – a system of radios, fiber, and phone lines that takes information from remote field sites back to BPA's core communication network and control centers – would be installed in new or existing interior communications racks.

Existing coaxial cable ports on the side of the communication building would be outfitted with new assembly kits. Two 20-foot-long VHF rod antennas would be installed on the tower, replacing one existing 20-foot-tall antenna. Associated coaxial cabling for antenna transmission would be installed on the tower and would connect at the building's ports.

Lastly, new VHF radios ('repeaters') would be installed in the communication building and connected to the antennas and coaxial cable. All old equipment would be retired from the site and either disposed of or returned to inventory for spares or parts.

Work would be conducted over a three to four year period, starting in the summer of 2016.

**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, July 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/ Michael J. O'Connell  
Michael J. O'Connell  
Environmental Protection Specialist

Concur:

/s/ Stacy L. Mason  
Stacy L. Mason  
NEPA Compliance Officer

Date: September 8, 2016

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

Located in Sanders County, Montana, the Thompson Falls Radio Station is situated in a wooded valley floor between the Rocky Mountain foothills and a narrow reservoir. The vegetation of the vicinity is conifer forest, mainly comprised of fir, spruce, and pine.

### Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

Environmental Resource Impacts	No Potential for Significance	No Potential for Significance, with Conditions
1. <b>Historic and Cultural Resources</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p><u>Explanation:</u> BPA has determined that the undertaking would have no potential to cause effects (36 CFR 800.3(a)(1)). A literature search and records review was performed at the Montana SHPO through the Cultural Resource Annotated Bibliography System, and the Cultural Resource Information Systems, and results were received on August 3, 2016. No cultural resources were identified within the project area. On this basis, BPA determined that there was not a need to initiate consultation with the Montana State Historic Preservation Office and the Tribal entities in the vicinity.</p>		
2. <b>Geology and Soils</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p><u>Explanation:</u> All work would be inside the fenced radio station yard. One to five hand-excavated pits to spot-weld new wires to the grounding ring, and for performing any needed repairs to the ring, would extend 18 inches through the graveled yard surface and the previously disturbed soil and fill of the yard.</p>		
3. <b>Plants</b> (including federal/state special-status species)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p><u>Explanation:</u> All travel would be on established access roads, and all work would occur inside the denuded, station yard. No plants, including special status species, would be affected.</p>		
4. <b>Wildlife</b> (including federal/state special-status species and habitats)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p><u>Explanation:</u> USFWS was consulted via the Information for Planning and Conservation (IPaC) online consultation system on August 19, 2016. The Yellow billed cuckoo is listed threatened, yet the nearest occurrence is nearly 80 miles to the southeast; planned work would not disturb potential breeding. The Canada lynx could occur in the project area yet would be unaffected by project work as there are no recorded occurrences in the 10-mile project vicinity and the area is within a relatively high human traffic area. The grizzly bear could also occur in the area of the Cabinet-Yaak grizzly bear recovery zone. The work would create some noise that would deter grizzly bear from approaching the site, thereby avoiding human-bear conflict. The proposed threatened North American wolverine could occur but it is unlikely to find the species at relatively low elevations where humans have altered the landscape. In summary, because the project is small in scope, is in a human traffic area not far from a town, and would not impact habitat elements, no impacts to wildlife, including special-status species, would be</p>		

expected with the project. The level of activity and noise would not rise above typical maintenance projects at the site so habituated wildlife in the immediate vicinity would not be disturbed.

- ✓ Bear-proof all bear attractants such as food to avoid encounters with grizzly bear.

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



Explanation: No water bodies are present at the radio station site; the station is situated in a gently sloping, heavily wooded area. There is threatened bull trout Critical Habitat at the Noxon Reservoir over a mile from the project area.

6. **Wetlands**



Explanation: There are no wetlands in the project's zone of potential impact.

7. **Groundwater and Aquifers**



Explanation: The hand-excavation would not extend past the 18 inches needed to access the grounding ring and would therefore have no potential to impact groundwater or aquifers.

8. **Land Use and Specially Designated Areas**



Explanation: There would be no impact to land use or specially designated areas because work would use well-defined access, remain within previously disturbed area limits, and would be small in scope and short in duration.

9. **Visual Quality**



Explanation: The two rod antennas that would be installed would be similar in appearance and size to the one they would replace. The change would not be evident from viewpoints along the ridges above the valley.

10. **Air Quality**



Explanation: There would be no impact to air quality.

11. **Noise**



Explanation: There would be temporary increases in localized noise around work activities to take place in the communication building and in the radio station yard. It would be expected that noise levels would remain within the normal range expected for activities that would be manual in nature.

12. **Human Health and Safety**



Explanation: Public health and safety would not be impacted from the work that would be localized to radio station grounds. Worker health and safety would not be adversely impacted as OSHA guidelines would be followed as a term of the contract and as protocol for BPA employees' work. In all, an improvement in human health and safety would be expected with a more robust and reliable two-way radio that is used for critical activities centered around energized electric transmission facilities.

### 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, if necessary:

- Require siting and construction or major expansion of waste storage, disposal, recovery, or treatment facilities (including incinerators) that are not otherwise categorically excluded.

Explanation, if necessary:

- 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, if necessary:

- 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, if necessary:

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### **Landowner Notification, Involvement, or Coordination**

Description: The Thompson Falls radio station is on private land which BPA owns a perpetual easement for access and operation. The work is small in scope so there would be no need for notification, involvement, or coordination of other entities.

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

Signed: /s/ Michael J. O'Connell  
Michael J. O'Connell

Date: September 8, 2016