

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)

LOWER SNAKE RIVER FISH AND WILDLIFE COMPENSATION PLAN WILDLIFE RIPARIAN HABITAT PLANTING

I. Introduction/Proposed Action

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Walla Walla District (Corps), is proposing to plant up to 200 additional acres of high-quality, self-sustaining riparian habitat within Habitat Management Units (HMU) and potentially other sites located along the lower Snake River on Corps managed federal lands to create or enhance wildlife habitat. The intent of this action is to help meet terrestrial wildlife mitigation requirements of the Lower Snake River Fish and Wildlife Compensation Plan (Comp Plan).

II. Background Information

The Lower Snake River Project (LSRP) consists of the Ice Harbor, Lower Monumental, Little Goose and Lower Granite dams and reservoirs. To meet the requirements of the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act (FWCA) for the LSRP, the Corps developed the Comp Plan, a negotiated settlement agreed to by the Corps, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Its intent is to mitigate for the loss of fish and wildlife resources and their habitat, as well as the loss to fish- and wildlife-oriented recreational opportunities caused by the construction of the four lower Snake River dams.

By 2013, all Comp Plan goals had been met except for riparian habitat. The Corps proposes to meet its mitigation requirements for the Comp Plan by planting up to 200 additional acres of high-quality, self-sustaining riparian habitat which would also meet WDFW and USFWS preferences. The Corps' native planting design would be coordinated with WDFW and USFWS and would complete approximately 71% of the Comp Plan's initial riparian habitat goals.

III. Statement of Purpose and Need

The Corps is proposing to plant up to 200 additional acres of high-quality, self-sustaining, native riparian habitat on Corps managed federal lands located within the Lower Snake River area. The objective is to create and/or enhance wildlife habitat that was lost from the construction of the LSRP. The underlying need for the planting project is to satisfy the requirements of the FWCA by meeting the goals identified in the Comp Plan.

IV. Project Alternatives

The following alternatives were identified and considered for this project.

Alternative 1 (No Action (No Change) Alternative): The No Action alternative represents a continuation of current Corps wildlife habitat planting practices on District lands. These projects are typically 5 to 10 acres in size and are carried forward as funding and resources become available. While the “no action” alternative does not meet the project purpose and needs requirements, under Council on Environmental Quality guidelines it serves as the project baseline for environmental conditions and therefore was carried forward for analysis.

Alternative 2 (Proposed Alternative): Under Alternative 2, the proposed action, all Corps-owned lands within the Lower Snake River area which are suitable and available for planting, could potentially be selected for riparian habitat development or enhancement. Development/enhancement would consist of planting native riparian vegetation across some or all of three habitat zones - seasonal inundation, lower transition, and upper transition. Plant species used would come from a list of native riparian vegetation specifically developed for the Lower Snake River habitat enhancement program. The vegetation species (i.e. trees and/or shrubs) planted within each habitat zone would be native to and suited for that particular zone.

Planting activities may be implemented at any time of year, but would be conducted primarily from spring through fall (March through October). To help minimize potential negative impacts from the proposed planting methods, best management practices (BMP) would be employed as needed and appropriate.

Alternatives Considered but Removed from Further Consideration:

Beyond the No Action and Preferred alternatives, no other alternatives were identified for this project. Additional alternatives which would reasonably meet the project purpose and need statement would only be a variation of the preferred alternative.

Preferred Alternative: Alternative 2 was selected as the preferred alternative as it met all the identified project purpose and need conditions. The preferred alternative maximizes the opportunity to develop high-quality riparian habitat producing maximum benefits, stays within Comp Plan funding limits and meets USFWS and WDFW planting preferences.

V. Environmental Effects: The following environmental resources/components were identified as being relevant to the project – biological, water quality, cultural resources, cumulative effects, vegetation, recreation, soils, aesthetics/visual quality, environmental justice, noise, climate change, air quality and socioeconomics. Environmental analysis and impacts of the preferred and “no

action” alternatives are detailed in the project Environmental Assessment (EA). The EA analysis concluded there would be no significant impacts to the environment resulting from implementation of the preferred alternative.

The Corps made project determinations of “may affect, not likely to adversely affect” or “no effect” for the ESA listed species which may occur in the identified planting areas. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), based on the Corps’ submitted 2013 project determinations and planting documentation, stated that no further coordination was required on the Comp Plan planting program unless there were changes to the program. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) will respond after review of the Riparian Planting EA. The agency’s comments will be included in the final, signed FONSI.

Under the Clean Water Act, a National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System permit (i.e. Construction General) and Storm Water Pollution Prevention Plan will be required as more than an acre of ground will be disturbed. In addition, some planting would be done below the ordinary high water mark. However, this activity would be covered under Nationwide Permit 27 (Aquatic Habitat Restoration, Establishment, and Enhancement Activities) and would meet identified conditions and requirements.

On June 28, 2012, the Corps sent letters to the Washington State Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, Nez Perce Tribe, Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation and the Wanapum Band (Appendix B). The letters initiated consultation/coordination on both the Corps’ overall proposed Comp Plan planting program. On June 3, 2013, the Corps sent a follow up letter expanding the APE to include suitable Corps managed federal lands outside of HMUs (Appendix B). As sites are identified for riparian planting under this EA, the Corps will continue to consult, coordinate and work with all interested parties with regard to cultural resources and the Section 106 process.

VI. Coordination

The project has been coordinated with the USFWS, NMFS, Environmental Protection Agency, Washington Department of Ecology, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Washington Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, Wanapum Band, Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation, Nez Perce Tribe, Whitman County, Walla Walla County, Garfield County and Walla Walla Joint Community Development Agency.

The project EA was released for a 15-day public comment period. Notice of the proposed project along with the EA and draft FONSI was made available on the Corps’ website for viewing.

VII. Conclusion/Finding

I have taken into consideration the technical aspects of the project, best scientific information available, public comments, and the information contained in the EA. Based on this information, I have determined that the preferred alternative would not significantly affect the quality of the human environment, and an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

Timothy R. Vail
Lieutenant Colonel, Corps of Engineers
District Commander

Date

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