

Finding of No Significant Impact
Kootenai National Wildlife Refuge Floodplain Reconnection Project
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
DOE/EA-2276

Boundary County, Idaho
April 2025

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) announces environmental findings for the proposal to amend selected wildlife, habitat, and public use objectives and strategies described in the Kootenai National Wildlife Refuge (KNWR or Refuge) Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and restore floodplain connectivity to the historic Kootenai River floodplains within the Refuge in Boundary County, Idaho near Bonners Ferry, Idaho.

The Service is a Cooperating Agency for Bonneville Power Administration's (BPA) proposal to fund the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho (KTOI) to implement floodplain reconnection activities on the Service-managed Refuge. Reconnection activities include breaching levees, raising roads, replacing flood control structures, enhancing wetlands, and re-establishing wetland connections.

BPA's draft and final Environmental Assessment (EA) describes and analyzes BPA-funded activities associated with the Kootenai NWR Floodplain Reconnection Project. Pursuant to the Department of the Interior's NEPA regulations, the Service hereby adopts the BPA final EA (DOE/EA-2276) and incorporates it by reference (43 C.F.R. § 46.320). Based on the analysis and public comments received, the Service has determined that the Proposed Action is not a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment, within the meaning of the NEPA, as amended (42 United States Code [U.S.C.] 4321 *et seq.*).¹ Therefore, the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not required, and the Service is issuing this Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for the Proposed Action. The Proposed Action is not the type of action that normally requires preparation of an EIS and is not without precedent.

¹ Executive Order 14154, *Unleashing American Energy* (Jan. 20, 2025), and a Presidential Memorandum, *Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity* (Jan. 21, 2025), require the Department to strictly adhere to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), 42 U.S.C. §§ 4321 *et seq.* Further, such Order and Memorandum repeal Executive Orders 12898 (Feb. 11, 1994) and 14096 (Apr. 21, 2023). Because Executive Orders 12898 and 14096 have been repealed, complying with such Orders is a legal impossibility. The Service verifies that it has complied with the requirements of NEPA, including the Department's regulations and procedures implementing NEPA at 43 C.F.R. Part 46 and Part 516 of the Departmental Manual, consistent with the President's January 2025 Order and Memorandum.

Selected Action—Proposed Action

Selection of the Proposed Action would officially amend selected wildlife, habitat, and public use objectives and strategies in the USFWS Kootenai NWR Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) to allow KTOI, via BPA funding, to restore floodplain connectivity to the historical Kootenai River floodplains within the Refuge in Boundary County, Idaho near Bonners Ferry, Idaho.

The project's reconnection activities would include breaching levees, raising roads, replacing flood control structures, enhancing wetlands and riparian areas, and re-establishing wetland connections. All of these actions would occur within an overall project area of about 2,330 acres.

Other Alternative Considered and Analyzed – No Action Alternative

Under the No Action Alternative, the Refuge would continue to be managed as described in the CCP, with wildlife, habitat, and public use programs remaining essentially unchanged.

Summary of Effects of the Selected Action

BPA prepared an EA in compliance with NEPA to provide a decision-making framework that 1) explored a reasonable range of alternatives to meet project objectives; 2) evaluated potential issues and impacts to the refuge, resources, and values; and 3) identified mitigation measures to lessen the degree or extent of these impacts. The potential impacts of the proposal on affected resources are presented in Chapter 3 *Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences*, of the draft and final EA and are summarized below. The Proposed Action, with implementation of selected mitigation measures, would have no significant impacts. The EA is incorporated as part of this finding.

Geology and Soils

Impacts to geology and soils would range from low adverse to moderate beneficial:

- There would be short-term low-level impacts to soil, such as compaction, from implementing restoration actions and road reconstruction. These impacts would not be significant because compacted and excavated soils would likely return to their pre-construction productivity and function in the years following the completion of construction activities.
- There would be moderate beneficial long-term effects of restoration actions from the improvements to soil quality and productivity.

Vegetation

Impacts to vegetation would range from low adverse to moderate to high beneficial:

- There would be short-term low-level impacts to vegetation due to crushing and removal during construction. These impacts would not be significant because the project area would be replanted with native vegetation after construction, which would restore a native riparian plant community.
- There would be long-term high beneficial impacts to vegetation due to restored floodplain function and revegetated native plant communities.

Water Resources

Impacts to water resources would range from low adverse to moderate beneficial:

- There would be short-term low adverse effects to water resources from small amounts of turbidity reaching the Kootenai River after the initial seasonal inundation. Construction work would not occur during the wet season. These impacts would not be significant because of the timing of planned construction actions and relatively low amount of sediment expected to reach the Kootenai River.
- There would be long-term moderate beneficial effects to water resources from restored floodplain function on the Refuge and revegetated native plant communities.

Wetlands

Impacts to wetlands would range from low adverse to moderate beneficial:

- There would be short-term low adverse effects to wetlands from floodplain grading in wetland areas. These impacts would not be significant due to the short-term nature of the construction disturbances and the improved wetland hydrologic function resulting from the breaching the levee.
- There would be long-term moderate beneficial effects to wetlands from reconnecting the historic Kootenai River floodplain resulting in an increase in quantity and quality of wetland habitats.

Fish and Aquatic Habitats

Impacts to fish and aquatic habitats would be moderate beneficial:

- There would be no short-term impacts from construction since in-water work would not occur and any subsequent sediment reaching the Kootenai River would be of low levels.
- There would be long-term moderate beneficial effects for fish caused by new seasonal inundation of the Refuge, such as access to off-channel habitats, increased nutrient exchange between the river and the floodplain, and floodplain conditions that allow for more complex and diverse riparian vegetation.

Wildlife

Impacts to wildlife would range from low adverse to moderate beneficial:

- There would be short-term low adverse effects from construction noise resulting in displacement of wildlife from their preferred habitats. These impacts would not be significant because wildlife would return to the project area after construction.
- There would be long-term moderate beneficial impacts for wildlife from planting vegetation in wetland and riparian areas that increase habitat types and complexity.

Cultural Resources

There would be low impacts to cultural resources:

- Previously identified resources in the area would either not be affected or were determined to be not eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

Land Use, Recreation

Impacts to land use and recreation would range from none for land use to moderate beneficial for recreation:

- There would be no change to land uses as the result of the Proposed Action.
- The portion of the Refuge that would be affected by construction would be closed while construction is occurring. Recreationalists would temporarily lose access during this time. These impacts would not be significant because of the short duration of the closure and the resulting improvements for recreationalists following construction.
- There would be long-term moderate beneficial effects to recreation from road improvements, new viewing areas, and increases in native habitats attracting additional birds and wildlife for visitors' viewing. By allowing for annual seasonal inundations the Proposed Action would support the establishment of different riparian vegetation communities in floodplains, which would support a greater diversity of terrestrial wildlife and pollinator species habitats, ensuring their resiliency during climate change.

Transportation

Impacts to transportation would range from moderate adverse to moderate beneficial:

- There would be short-term moderate adverse effects resulting from the closure of Riverside Road. The road closure would require drivers to follow a temporary detour that would add 30 minutes for travel between the Refuge headquarters and Bonners Ferry, Idaho. These impacts would not be significant because of the short duration of the closure and the improved conditions on Riverside Road following construction.
- There would be long term moderate beneficial effects resulting from improvements to Riverside Road, which would be wider and safer for drivers as well as provide 5-foot-wide shoulders for cyclists, pedestrians, and ATV users.

Climate Change

Impacts relating to climate change would be low adverse to low beneficial:

- Construction equipment for the restoration actions and road improvements would have short-term low-level greenhouse-gas emissions which would not substantially contribute to global climate change and, therefore, not result in a significant impact.
- The long-term effect would be low beneficial resulting from restoration actions that would contribute to the amelioration of climate change by restoring functional riparian, wetland, and floodplain habitats that store carbon.

Noise

Impacts from noise would be low adverse:

- There would be short-term low adverse effects resulting from elevated noise levels during construction activities during daytime hours. Because the Refuge would be closed during construction, no visitors would be present, and thus, would not be affected. Several residences are located across Myrtle Creek on Westside Road but are greater than 150 feet away, so construction noise would result in a minimal elevation of noise above ambient levels. Overall, due to the short duration of these construction-related elevated noise levels, there would not be a significant noise impact.
- There would be no change to noise levels in the long term.

Public Health and Safety

Impacts to public health and safety would be low to moderate adverse:

- There would be short-term low-level adverse effects during construction due to some health and safety risks to workers and the public. These impacts would be comparable to a standard construction project and not significant because adequate signage and other safeguards for worker and public safety would minimize the risks.
- There would be long-term beneficial impacts to driver, pedestrian, and cyclist public health and safety from Riverside Road improvements that include a new asphalt surface, lines, guard rails, a wider shoulder, and better sight lines.

Measures to mitigate and/or minimize adverse effects are incorporated into BPA's Mitigation Action Plan, which includes all of the integral elements and commitments made in the EA to mitigate potential adverse environmental impacts.

BPA and its contractor are responsible for implementing the mitigation measures during various phases of project construction. Relevant portions of this Mitigation Action Plan will be included in the construction contract specifications, which will obligate the contractor to implement the mitigation measures identified that relate to contractor responsibilities during, and after construction.

Public Review

The proposal was coordinated with potentially interested and/or affected parties, including interested governments, tribes, organizations, and individuals. BPA released the draft EA for

public review and comment on September 18, 2024, and held a public meeting in Bonners Ferry, Idaho on October 1, 2024. Staff from BPA, KTOI, and the Refuge were present to describe the project, answer questions, and direct people to where they could submit public comments. The 30-day public comment period ended on October 17, 2024. Eight comment letters were received. The full text and agency response to each comment is provided in BPAs final EA.

Finding of No Significant Impact

Based upon a review and evaluation of the information contained in the EA as well as other documents and actions of record affiliated with this proposal, the Service has determined that the proposal to implement the *Kootenai National Wildlife Refuge Floodplain Reconnection Project* on the Kootenai NWR does not constitute a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment (43 U.S.C. § 4332(2)(c)). As such, an EIS is not required.

Decision

The Service has decided to adopt BPA's draft and final EA and implement the Kootenai National Wildlife Refuge Floodplain Reconnection Project.

This action is compatible with the purposed of the refuge and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The action is consistent with applicable laws and policies.

Alyssa Hausman
Acting Assistant Regional Director
Pacific Region 1, National Wildlife Refuge System
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Date

Supporting Documents

Bonneville Power Administration. April 2025. Final Kootenai National Wildlife Refuge Floodplain Reconnection Environmental Assessment. Available: <https://www.bpa.gov/learn-and-participate/public-involvement-decisions/project-reviews/kootenai-national-wildlife-refuge-floodplain>