

SUPPLEMENTAL ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT  
FOR VOLUNTARY PUBLIC ACCESS AND HABITAT INCENTIVE PROGRAM:  
YAKAMA NATION WILDLIFE RECREATION ENHANCEMENT PROJECT

BACKGROUND

The Secretary of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) was authorized by the Food Security Act of 1985, as amended, to implement the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP). The program provides grants to State and Tribal governments to encourage owners and operators of privately-held farm, ranch, and forest land to make land available for access by the public for wildlife-dependent recreation, including hunting, fishing, and other compatible recreation and to improve fish and wildlife habitat on their land.

Administrative authority for the program initially was assigned to the Farm Service Agency (FSA). FSA awarded a VPA-HIP grant to the Yakama Nation in 2011. The Yakama Nation and FSA jointly prepared a Programmatic Environmental Assessment (EA) to meet the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) and in October 2011 FSA issued a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for the use of VPA-HIP funds for the Yakama Nation Wildlife Recreation Enhancement Project . The 2011 grant was to have extended for a period of 3 years, but only one year of funding was provided.

Beginning in Fiscal Year 2014, the Secretary delegated administrative authority for the VPA-HIP to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The Yakama Nation applied for and was awarded another grant to continue funding the Wildlife Recreation Enhancement Project. The NRCS is adopting the FSA 2011 Programmatic EA for the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program: Yakama Nation Wildlife Recreation Enhancement Project. NRCS is supplementing that EA with this document, to incorporate additional information that has become available since publication of the 2011 EA.

The Yakama Nation's Wildlife Recreation Enhancement Project is a component of the existing Lower Yakima Valley Wetlands and Riparian Restoration Project (Wetlands and Riparian Restoration Project), funded largely by the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) as a wildlife and wildlife habitat mitigation project for several BPA dams and reservoirs. The BPA mitigation

project is contained within the boundaries of the Yakama Nation Reservation. In 1994, the BPA, Yakama Nation, and Bureau of Indian Affairs collaborated to produce the Lower Yakima Valley Wetlands and Riparian Restoration Project Final Environmental Assessment (BPA EA, Appendix A) on a project area of 50,308 acres, which includes all of the areas affected by the proposed action. With the exception of changes in species' status under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the progress made restoring wetland and riparian habitat, conditions within the project area have not changed substantially since 1994, and the EA continues to support BPA-funded restoration activities in the area. The Wildlife Recreation Enhancement Project, which is managed through the Yakama Nation's Wildlife, Range, and Vegetation Resources Management Program (WRVMP), provides assistance by improving viewing opportunities, accessibility and educational information related to wildlife restoration efforts. Of the entire BPA Wetlands and Riparian Restoration Project area, about 21,000 acres of land within the agricultural valley portion of the project area have been enrolled into the Wetlands and Riparian Restoration Project to date. Enrolled properties include about 8,500 acres of lands under private ownership (by individual Yakama Tribal members) and 12,500 acres of lands owned by the Yakama Nation. These lands have only been open to the non-Yakama public for small game hunting and fishing under the Public Hunting and Fishing Program but now these and other lands within the project area can be opened for wildlife viewing and environmental education as well through the Wildlife Recreation Enhancement Program. Using the 2011 VPA-HIP grant, WRVMP biologists developed the Yakama Nation's Valley Restoration Areas Wildlife Viewing and Environmental Education Management Plan (Wildlife Viewing Plan, Appendix B) and began implementing enhancements to facilitate recreational use of the 21,000 acres. Enhancements included developing trail systems and constructing a large bird viewing platform, as well as blinds, signs and sign kiosks.

WRVMP staff now propose to use the second VPA-HIP grant in the amount of \$374,584 to continue implementing the Wildlife Recreation Enhancement Project to increase non-consumptive recreational opportunities on lands enrolled in the Wetlands and Riparian Restoration Project. The 2014 VPA-HIP grant funds will be used for the same types of activities as those funded under the 2011 grant, with particular emphasis on facilitating non-consumptive wildlife recreational use of the 21,000 acres by carrying out projects in the Wildlife Viewing

Plan. NRCS has prepared this Supplemental EA to incorporate new information contained in the Wildlife Viewing Plan, and additional information from the BPA EA.

#### PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

The purpose of the proposed action continues to be to provide increased opportunities to Yakama people and the general public for appreciating wildlife, particularly in wetland and riparian habitats. In addition, the proposed action is needed because it has been shown that time spent in nature is required for healthy development of children and for human emotional and physical health. Currently, there are few areas in the lower Yakima Valley conducive to enjoying natural places (Wildlife Viewing Plan 2012.) There is also a need to control, manage, and monitor recreational access to prevent conflicts with the habitat restoration and wildlife management goals of the Wetlands and Riparian Restoration Project and the existing Public Hunting Program. This need was identified in the BPA EA and the Wildlife Viewing Plan.

#### ALTERNATIVES

##### Proposed Action:

The WRVMP proposes to use 2014 VPA-HIP grant funds over a three-year period, with a possible 2-year extension, to continue implementing the Wildlife Recreation Enhancement Project to 1) develop a non-consumptive recreation access permit system similar to that used for the Public Hunting and Fishing Program, 2) enhance enrolled properties to facilitate non-consumptive use, 3) develop materials to guide non-consumptive use and, 4) monitor non-consumptive use. The key difference between the 2011 VPA-HIP grant activities and the 2014 VPA-HIP grant activities is that the Wildlife Viewing Plan and wildlife viewing platform have now been completed. Construction of trails, fences, and blinds and installation of signs would be conducted in accordance with mitigating measures identified in Chapter 4 of the BPA EA and the Wildlife Viewing Plan.

##### No Action:

The No Action Alternative continues to be as described in the 2011 Programmatic EA.

## ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

The NRCS has reviewed the FSA's 2011 EA and determined that adopting it and supplementing it with information from the BPA EA and the Wildlife Viewing Plan, would provide an adequate description of the environmental impacts of the continued implementation of the Wildlife Recreation Enhancement Project with 2014 VPA-HIP grant funds. As a result, NRCS is adopting the 2011 EA and supplementing it by incorporating by reference the mitigating measures contained within the BPA EA and the Wildlife Viewing Plan and by describing the effects of using 2014 VPA-HIP funds to implement planned recreational activities with the additional mitigation measures. Planned recreational enhancements are described in the following paragraph. Locations of the planned enhancements are shown on maps in the Wildlife Viewing Plan (Appendix B, pages 10 - 13).

Parking areas will be improved at property entrance locations. Signs will be posted to identify parking areas, trail heads, and to delineate the trails themselves. Existing roads and cattle trails will be used as much as possible. A self-pay station will be installed at the primary entry point to the Satus Recreation Area. Fencing will be installed where needed to control cattle access. Annually, trails will be cleared of vegetation and improved to guide visitors through desirable areas, and removable foot bridge and boardwalk sections will be installed when water levels are low, and then moved to storage in winter. Some habitat improvement work such as weed removal will be conducted. Interpretive signs will be installed on the wildlife viewing platform, along trails, and at parking areas to educate the public about the resources, rules and regulations, and ways to avoid causing adverse impacts to resources while recreating. Photography and wildlife viewing blinds will be installed and maintained in high-interest areas, allowing optimal viewing of habitats and animals with minimal disturbance.

All enhancement activities would occur on properties enrolled under the existing Wetland and Riparian Restoration Project. Long term management plans (Site Plans) have been developed for each enrolled property and are amended and updated as needed. The Site Plans document the site-specific habitat restoration, management and enhancement activities, Operation and Maintenance (O&M) requirements, and Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) operations to be implemented. Activities such as water and vegetation management, fence and gate construction and maintenance, and weed control are included in Site Plans as O&M operations. Chapter 4 of

the BPA EA identifies the environmental consequences of these activities along with mitigation measures to avoid or minimize adverse effects. Because some of the same types of activities are to be carried out with VPA-HIP funds through the Wildlife Recreation Enhancement Project, Chapter 4 of the BPA EA is hereby incorporated by reference. These mitigation measures are required to be used on all enrolled properties.

The Wildlife Viewing Plan further recognizes that the primary purpose of properties enrolled under the Wetland and Riparian Restoration Project is to provide quality fish and wildlife habitat and that recreational access needs to be managed in such a way as to not compromise those benefits. Placement of infrastructure and parameters for when and where access is allowed are designed to avoid harmful impacts to the extent possible. These and other mitigation measures are described in the Wildlife Viewing Plan and will be followed.

Soil disturbance associated with construction or improvement of parking areas, trails, fences, and blinds and installation of signs may temporarily increase sediment delivery to streams and wetlands. Work near water bodies involving the potential for sediment entering streams or wetlands and heavy equipment use near streams and wetlands will be avoided to the extent possible. Where avoidance is not possible, all construction work performed in or near bodies of water must be planned and completed in coordination with the Yakama Nation Water Code, Fisheries, and Environmental Protection Departments. Clean Water Act permits will be obtained where necessary and terms and conditions established in Federal permits and applicable Tribal Water Code requirements will be followed. Most work will take place only in the driest portion of the year when streamflows and water levels are at their lowest.

Parking areas to be improved will use areas already driven and/or used for parking to the extent practicable. This is expected to better define the areas where vehicles may be parked and allow for revegetation outside of this area. A buffer of intact vegetation between parking areas and water bodies will be maintained and will reduce sediment delivery to water bodies. In general, trails will not be built through areas that will be wet during the season of use and will not intercept and channel water. Where crossing wet areas is unavoidable, removable footbridges and boardwalks will be used.

Increased foot and vehicle traffic due to recreational use may also cause increases in sediment delivery to streams and wetlands as well as improper trash and waste disposal. The trail system design, which maximizes the use of existing disturbed areas, together with fences and gates to prohibit access to closed areas and informational signs and brochures will be used to reduce the potential for these effects to occur. Well-secured trash cans will be made available at parking areas and emptied regularly. Portable bathrooms may be installed and maintained year-round at least one central location, if monitoring or user feedback indicates that they are necessary.

Loss of wildlife habitat and wildlife disturbance due to construction and recreational use are expected to be of short duration, and localized in nature. Access for wildlife viewing is anticipated to be limited to one day a week during the most sensitive waterfowl breeding period (March through June) and two days per week through the remainder of summer (July through September). Further seasonal restrictions may also apply in areas where nesting occurs, and where wet conditions necessitate area closures. Immediate closures may occur if serious problems arise.

Weed control, trail clearing, and construction will be planned to avoid critical nesting and brood-rearing seasons. To further reduce potential disturbance of bald eagles, public access into the project area by motorized vehicles would be allowed only when bald eagles are not present. No new trails would be developed near bald eagle nests.

To avoid the potential for increased recreation use to spread invasive weeds, WRVMP's existing weed control program will continue and will prioritize control in recreational use areas. Site-specific herbicide selection shall conform to BIA Farm Plan requirements regarding chemical and label restrictions.

Buffers of intact vegetation will be maintained between parking areas and water bodies and along trails to reduce the potential to disturb wildlife. Blinds will be constructed to reduce disturbance where use by waterfowl and/or other species is reasonably consistent, concealment of viewers by natural vegetation is inadequate to prevent disturbing wildlife, and people will not be visible on their approach to the blind.

Dock construction to facilitate access for paddling will occur only in designated areas on Sumac and Corral Lakes and outside the primary nesting season to avoid disturbance to waterfowl. Open waterbodies with large concentrations of waterfowl will be kept closed to paddling. Signs and interpretive materials will emphasize the need to avoid unnecessary disturbance of wildlife. The canoe docks are simple structures, roughly 4-5' wide by 6-8' long planked decks supported by sealed PVC tubes. Although small posts may be needed on shore to anchor these, there will be no piers installed in the water.

A cultural resource reconnaissance survey completed in 1993 determined the existence of cultural resource sites within the project area. Access for recreational use will not be enabled near areas where there are concentrations of archaeological resources, and addition of new gates under this project will improve protection of sensitive areas during the hunting season as well. Educational materials and interpretive signs will also be used to remind non-Yakamas that they may not remove any resources or materials unless specifically permitted to do so.

The Yakama Nation's Tribal Historic Preservation Office (THPO) has provided a letter (Appendix C) clarifying that work in previously disturbed areas and work that does not involve ground disturbance will not adversely affect historic properties. Blinds and signs with bases that will be installed in the ground will require consultation with the THPO to prevent adverse effects and to meet the requirements of Tribal and Federal laws. The WRVMP staff will consult with THPO prior to ground disturbing activities occurring, as outlined in the letter in Appendix C.

Constraints on days and hours of use will help avoid potential conflicts with Yakama people engaged in harvesting traditional resources. Recreational uses will occur outside of areas open to hunting and/or when no hunting is occurring to ensure safety.

Short-term effects to threatened and endangered species and designated critical habitat, and essential fish habitat may occur during construction activities and as a result of recreational use. These effects are described in the Biological Evaluation in Appendix D. NRCS is designating the Yakama Nation, as its non-Federal representative pursuant to 50 CFR 402.02 and 50 CFR 402.08, for the purpose of conducting informal consultation with the Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service as required by the Endangered Species Act to ensure the proposed action avoids adverse effects to the extent practicable.

## Conclusion

As a result of the Yakama Nation's and NRCS's commitment to obtain required permits, complete required consultations, and incorporate all required terms and conditions and conservation measures into the installation, operation, and maintenance of recreation enhancements, NRCS anticipates that only minor, short-term adverse effects will occur as a result of using VPA-HIP funds to install the enhancements described in this document. In the long-term, increased opportunities to Yakama people and the general public for appreciating wildlife and wetlands will be provided with minimal disturbance to protected resources and other benefits described in the 2011 Programmatic EA will be obtained.

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