

WESTERN GOVERNORS WILDLIFE COUNCIL
Wildlife Categorization Criteria for WREZ

PURPOSE: To categorize lands in the WREZ “Qualified Resource Areas” (QRA’s) based on wildlife criteria for purposes of informing establishment of the Renewable Energy Zones for the WGA WREZ project. Categories will be determined by the Western Governors Wildlife Council.

Core premises of the Categorization Criteria:

- (a) Categorization of areas as “avoidance” or “high sensitivity” does not represent a binding preclusion from future development. These categorizations are solely used to characterize QRA’s and ultimately inform the delineation of Renewable Energy Zones.
- (b) These categorizations are not intended to replace, supplement, or reverse any project site specific placement or associated permit or other land use mechanism. Future projects, whether within renewable energy zones or not, will need to undergo the appropriate environmental and permitting reviews.
- (c) These categorizations do not apply at this time to the assessment of pathways for potential transmission lines or associated infrastructure. Another work process will be undertaken later in the renewable energy zone identification process to determine which of these land type determinations also apply to transmission siting.
- (d) Categorization of lands in the QRA’s will represent the current understanding of these lands as of this point in time, while recognizing that future changes in policy, law, and/or knowledge could change the categorization.
- (e) Categorization of lands within QRA’s will be limited to application toward utility-scale wind, solar, and geothermal resources primarily, and hydropower and biomass in specific instances.
- (f) For the purpose of this categorization effort, if any feature can be listed under more than one category it will default to the highest category for which it meets the criteria.
- (g) Identification of lands was limited to:
 - a. the United States located in the Western Interconnection;
 - b. areas of Baja, Mexico within the Western Interconnection; and
 - c. Alberta and British Columbia, Canada.
- (h) Areas within the QRAs not categorized under any of the four categories below contain some level of wildlife value, but are areas in which renewable energy development poses a lesser risk to wildlife and are believed to be the most suitable for development. Nevertheless, investigation of specific risks to wildlife in these areas may be needed or required.
- (i) Categorization of wildlife is intended to indicate a prioritization of these lands relative to wildlife, in order to encourage appropriate and corresponding levels of action when development is being considered, i.e., avoid, minimize, and mitigate.

CATEGORIZATION CRITERIA

Lands within the Qualified Resource Areas (QRAs) will be evaluated based on the following wildlife criteria, and categorized accordingly.

1) Exclusion Areas

Designated lands where statute, regulation or other legal instrument (e.g. conservation easement) precludes development.

2) Avoidance Areas

Areas crucial to wildlife conservation that are irreplaceable and where mitigation may not be feasible or effective. These areas reflect a relatively high standard of empirical knowledge, data analysis, or vetted process.

Examples include:

- Wildlife corridors and crucial habitat for a species that is endangered, vulnerable or threatened, game species, or otherwise determined to be crucial to wildlife conservation as defined on a state-by-state basis.
- Significant wildlife concentration areas (as defined in data request).
- Unique and/or rare ecosystems.
- Important biodiversity areas as defined on a state-by-state basis.
- State Wildlife Action Plan “Focus Areas” as determined on a state-by-state basis.
- Federally designated critical habitat.

3) High Sensitivity

Areas where development would likely pose a significant risk to wildlife values. These areas also reflect a relatively high standard of empirical knowledge, data analysis, or vetted process.

Examples include:

- Known wildlife corridors.

Example:

- Medium-priority Wildlife Linkage Areas identified by Oregon Wildlife Movement Strategy.

- Areas with significant wildlife-related regulatory impediments.

Example:

- Washington’s state environmental policy act.

- Wildlife corridors or crucial habitat identified in State Wildlife Action Plans and other state wildlife management or conservation plans.

Examples include:

- Species of greatest conservation need: Areas where there is a known concentration of these species.

- Other important habitat for T&E species not identified as “avoid.”
- NGO and Multi-stakeholder priority areas.
- Big game corridors and crucial habitat as defined on a state-by-state basis.
- Contiguous, unfragmented habitat.
- Ecosystems of concern.

4) **Areas with Insufficient Data**

Lands likely to have significant wildlife values, but for which there is insufficient data or a lack of information about the nature of the risk to wildlife.

Examples include:

- Ecological Systems of Concern not based on field verification.
- Areas likely to contain sensitive species as identified through a modeling effort. These are lands for which wildlife/ecological data (or expert knowledge) is not strong enough (or is missing) to meet definition of “Avoid” or “High Sensitivity” categories.
- Areas modeled to have probable distributions of sensitive species categories but where groundtruthing is necessary.
- Areas likely to contain mapped native ecosystem types (natural and semi-natural land cover) and modeled to have moderate to high modeled ecological integrity.