ANKLE CREEK INHOLDER ACCESS

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT OR-027-02-011

Bureau of Land Management
Burns District Office
28910 Hwy 20 West
Hines, Oregon 97738

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION: PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR ACTION

A. Location of Project

The 170,025-acre Steens Mountain Wilderness Area lies about 60 miles south of Burns, Oregon. There are about 40 private land parcels (inholdings) scattered throughout the Wilderness whose access is potentially affected by the Wilderness designation. This Environmental Assessment (EA) analyzes reasonable access to four of the inholdings located in the vicinity of Ankle Creek. Refer to the General Vicinity Map for a depiction of the Wilderness Area and the inholdings.

B. Purpose and Need for Action

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) needs to provide reasonable access to private land inholders within the boundaries of the Steens Mountain Wilderness. On October 30, 2000, the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Act (Steens Act) of 2000 (Public Law 106-399) was signed into law, designating certain public land within the Burns District, BLM as Wilderness. The designation closed a number of dirt roads and potentially affected the 25 private landowners whose property is surrounded by Wilderness. Access to non-Federally owned land is subject to the provisions of the Steens Act (Section 112 (e) (1)), the Wilderness Act, the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, and Federal regulations. The Steens Act states in Section 112(e) that "[t]he Secretary shall provide reasonable access to nonfederally owned lands or interests in land within the boundaries of the Cooperative Management and Protection Area and the Wilderness Area to provide the owner of the land or interest the reasonable use thereof." Reasonable access is determined for each inholding and can be motorized or nonmotorized depending on each particular circumstance. Land Use Permits issued under Code of Federal Regulations (43 CFR) 2920 or Cooperative Management Agreements entered under the Steens Act will be used to outline the terms and conditions of each access authorization. The BLM is directed in 43 CFR 6305.10 (a) (1) and (2) to only approve "that combination of routes and modes of travel to your land that BLM finds existed on the date Congress designated the area surrounding the inholding as Wilderness, and BLM determines will serve the reasonable purposes for which the non-Federal lands are held or used and cause the least impact on Wilderness character." Furthermore, 43 CFR 6305.10 (e) states that "BLM will not allow improvement of access routes to a condition more highly developed than that which existed on the date Congress designated the area as Wilderness…"

Of the four inholdings being analyzed in this EA, two are owned by Central Oregon Land, LLC (George Stroemple), and the other two by Annette Fisherman, daughter of Florence Ellis. The Fisherman properties, referred to in this EA as Ellis, are currently under a 5-year lease to John and Cindy Witzel, Steens Mountain Packers, Inc. (SMP), which expires March 30, 2006. The purchase of the properties by Mr. Stroemple and the lease to SMP both occurred after Wilderness designation.

In the past, the four inholdings have been accessed with motorized vehicles across public land by way of the Ankle Creek Road. Access has been seasonal, generally May through October, due to snow or wet road conditions during winter and early spring. An estimated five vehicles per week, of which three trips are estimated to be from landowners and lessees, used some portion of the Ankle Creek Road weekly prior to the Wilderness Designation. Vehicular use increased each September and October during big game hunting seasons, when approximately seven to nine hunting camps were located in proximity to the Stroemple and Ellis properties. The Stroemple inholdings were also accessed across Roaring Springs Ranch private land, however, this access was never formally approved by the ranch.

BLM has attempted to acquire the inholdings through purchase or exchange but has been unsuccessful to date. Currently, there is no appropriation for the purchase of these inholdings, however, the properties remain a priority for acquisition in order to consolidate Federal ownership within the Wilderness. Any authorization granting motorized access would become null and void once the properties are sold to the BLM or to another private entity who does not want motorized access. Activities occurring or which have occurred on the Ellis inholdings include camping, hunting, commercial outfitting, livestock grazing, and day-use recreation/visitation. Past activities for the Stroemple parcels were primarily livestock grazing and current uses are primarily hunting and day-use recreation/visitation. Ownership of the particular parcels and the location of the Ankle Creek route are shown on Inholder Map 1.

C. Conformance with Legislation and Land Use Plans

The alternatives are being analyzed for conformance with the provisions of the Wilderness Act of 1964, 43 CFR 6300, BLM Manual 8560 (Management of Designated Wilderness Areas (1983)), the Steens Act, and applicable regulations. In the case of an inholding, the Wilderness Act states in part "such State or private owner shall be given such rights as may be necessary to assure adequate access to such State-owned or privately owned land by such State or private owner and their successors in interest…." The Steens Act states in Section 112(e) that "[t]he Secretary shall provide reasonable access to nonfederally owned lands or interests in land within the boundaries of the Cooperative Management and Protection Area and the Wilderness Area to provide the owner of the land or interest the reasonable use thereof." This action is also consistent with the Andrews Land Use Plan (1982), as amended, which currently guides the management of public land within the Andrews Resource Area and the Draft Resource Management Plan (RMP) and Environmental Impact Statement for the Cooperative Management and Protection Area and the Andrews Management Unit.

D. Major Issues

Wilderness areas are subject to stringent management constraints to protect Wilderness as described in the Wilderness Act and implementing regulations. As noted, 43 CFR 6305.10 (a) (1) and (2) directs BLM to only approve "that combination of routes and modes of travel to your land that BLM finds existed on the date Congress designated the area surrounding the inholding as Wilderness, and BLM determines will serve the reasonable purposes for which the non-Federal lands are held or used and cause the least impact on Wilderness character."

Both SMP and Mr. Stroemple want to use snowmobiles to access their inholdings during winter months. The Stroemple parcels are approved for a Lot of Record Dwelling which allows the owner to construct a home on each of the properties. Additionally, Mr. Stroemple is requesting motorized access along the Berrington Trail, however, the top portion of the trail is not shown as a motorized route in the 1979-1980 High Steens Wilderness Study Area (WSA) inventory file. The condition of the trail has prevented use by motorized vehicles for many years. The Berrington Trail is shown on Inholder Map 1.

E. Steens Mountain Advisory Council Recommendation

Section 131 (a) of the Steens Act established the Steens Mountain Advisory Council (SMAC). The SMAC has recommended elements of Alternative C to the BLM. Their recommendation recognizes the need to provide reasonable access while letting seasons, route conditions, weather, etc., determine how and when to access the properties. They have also recommended the use of Cooperative Management Agreements to specifically outline the terms and conditions of the access authorization and that the Ankle Creek inholdings should be the Burns District's top land acquisition priority.

F. Public Scoping

In August 2003, the BLM mailed a scoping document to approximately 75 interested publics. Comments received from this scoping effort have been incorporated into this document.

CHAPTER II: ALTERNATIVES

Determinations common to all alternatives: The Ankle Creek route must not become more evident or larger than what it was at the time the Wilderness area was designated. Private landowners would be responsible for maintaining the route under normal circumstances. BLM personnel would supervise route maintenance performed with motorized and mechanized equipment to assure appropriate Wilderness protection**.** The BLM may maintain the route as needed for administrative purposes or to rehabilitate and protect Wilderness values.

Maintenance efforts using motorized or mechanized tools and equipment would undergo a Minimum Tool Analysis prior to carrying out the maintenance activity. Routes would not be maintained to a condition more highly developed than they were at the time of Wilderness designation. Snowmobiles are not recognized as a mode of travel at the time the area was designated as Wilderness and therefore cannot be used to access the inholdings. Snowmobile activity is also detrimental to Wilderness characteristics of solitude, naturalness, and primitive and unconfined recreation. An evaluation will be conducted in 3 to 5 years to determine if the authorized access is meeting Wilderness and landowner objectives and if not, appropriate action will be taken.

A. Limited Use Alternative (8.6 miles of motorized routes within the Wilderness)

Ellis Inholdings

This alternative would allow for the occasional use of motor vehicles along the Ankle Creek route to access one of these inholdings. The degree of authorized use would be one round trip per week with a maximum of four vehicles traveling together, to be used by the lessees, their guests or agents, to the Ellis property in Section 36, T. 34 S., R. 32¾ E. SMP could access the other Ellis parcel in Section 16, T. 34 S., R. 33 E., from the Stroemple property in Section 9, T. 34 S., R. 33 E. (after receiving permission), or they could park on public land along the Ankle Creek route and access the property using nonmotorized methods. Motorized use of the route south of the Section 36 inholding would not be allowed so that Wilderness values can be protected. Access to the Ankle Creek route would be from the South Steens Loop Road and would be authorized during the period of time, generally May 15 to November 15, when damage to the South Steens Loop Road and Ankle Creek route would not occur. The Ankle Creek route and the Stroemple and Ellis properties are shown on Inholding Map 1. The portion of the route(s) where motorized use is allowed under this alternative is shown on Inholding Map 2.

Stroemple Inholdings

This alternative would allow the occasional use of motor vehicles along the Ankle Creek route to access the inholding in Sections 8 and 9, T. 34 S., R. 33 E. One round trip per week with a maximum of four vehicles traveling together could be used by Mr. Stroemple, his guests or agents. With permission, Mr. Stroemple could access his inholding in Sections 1 and 2, T. 35 S., R. 32¾ E., across the Ellis property in Section 36, otherwise parking along the public land portion of the Ankle Creek route would be allowed.

Following the Ankle Creek route south 200 feet into Section 20 and parking along this public land segment of the route to facilitate nonmotorized access to the inholding in Sections 1 and 2 would also be allowed. Access to the Ankle Creek route would be from the South Steens Loop Road and would be authorized during the period of time, generally May 15 to November 15, when damage to the South Steens Loop Road and Ankle Creek route would not occur. The motorized route(s) available under this alternative is shown on Inholding Map 2.

B. No Motorized Access Alternative

Ellis and Stroemple Inholdings

Under this alternative, access by motor vehicles and/or the use of mechanized transport in accessing private land would not be authorized. All access through the Wilderness would be by nonmotorized and nonmechanized means. The number of trips to the inholdings would not be limited. Weed-free hay and/or pellets would be a condition of the authorization when livestock feed is brought into the Wilderness Area.

C. Retain Current Route Standard Alternative (17 miles of motorized routes within the Wilderness Area)

Ellis and Stroemple Inholdings

Under this alternative, the degree of use along the authorized routes would be limited only to the extent the routes are not improved to a condition more highly developed than they were at the time of Wilderness designation. If monitoring indicates that motorized use is causing the route to become more obvious, use would be reduced in order to return the route to the desired condition. In 43 CFR 6305.10(2) (e) it states in part, "BLM will not allow improvement of access routes to a condition more highly developed than that which existed on the date Congress designated the area as Wilderness…." Impacts to visitor solitude would be monitored using comment boxes, personal contacts, etc., and taken into account when adjustments to motorized access is being considered. Access to the Ankle Creek route would be from the South Steens Loop Road and would be authorized during the period of time, generally May 15 to November 15, when damage to the South Steens Loop Road and Ankle Creek route would not occur. The routes open to motorized use under this alternative are shown on Inholding Map 3.

D. Berrington Trail Maintenance (19.5 miles of motorized routes within the Wilderness Area)

This alternative would allow the maintenance of the Berrington Trail with hand tools so the Stroemple inholdings could be accessed with 4-wheeler All Terrain Vehicles (ATVs).

Larger vehicles would not be allowed on the Berrington Trail. This maintenance and use of Berrington Trail would be considered only in the context of a change in ownership and use patterns resulting from a sale/exchange of one of the Stroemple inholdings to BLM and conservation easements being included on the remaining parcel. This alternative is being analyzed based on recent conversations with Mr. Stroemple. There is some potential that a change in landownership and potential uses could obviate all or most of the need for Mr. Stroemple to use the Ankle Creek route and that use of the Berrington Trail could potentially cause less impact to Wilderness resources and the Wilderness experience. While BLM is exploring this alternative in order to continue a dialogue on this topic, BLM would have to be certain that this option would meet the intent of law and regulations described earlier in this EA.

Mr. Stroemple would potentially retain use of the Ankle Creek route from the north (Inholding Map 2) as needed to access the remaining inholding with larger vehicles. The portion of the Ankle Creek route north of the junction with the Berrington Trail that leads to the Ellis inholding in Section 16 would not be needed by Mr. Stroemple for motorized access purposes. Access to the Ellis inholdings would be the same as Alternative C. Access to the Ankle Creek route would be from the South Steens Loop Road and the Berrington Trail and would be authorized during the period of time, generally May 15 to November 15, when damage to the South Steens Loop Road, Ankle Creek route, and Berrington Trail would not occur. The Berrington Trail is shown on Inholding Map 1. The routes being considered for motorized use under this alternative are shown on Inholding Map 4.

Alternatives considered but not analyzed: The No Action Alternative was not considered because the continuation of casual use access across Wilderness is inconsistent with BLM regulations. An alternative to access the inholdings with the route partially on private land was considered but dropped at the request of the private landowner who was not interested in providing access across his private property. Unfettered access was considered as an alternative during the scoping period, however, the landowners and lessee are now supporting elements of Alternative C which is recommended by the SMAC.

CHAPTER III: DESCRIPTION OF THE AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

A. Critical Elements

The following critical elements of the human environment are either not known to be present or are not expected to be impacted by the alternatives: Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, Air Quality, Cultural Heritage, Prime or Unique Farmlands, Floodplains, Environmental Justice, Hazardous Materials, American Indian Religious Concerns, Special Status Plants, Paleontology, and Adverse Energy Impact.

The following critical elements are present and may be affected by all or some of the alternatives: Water Quality, Wetlands and Riparian Zones, Wild and Scenic Rivers (WSRs), Wilderness, Noxious Weeds, Migratory Birds, and Special Status Fauna.

1. Water Quality

The normal runoff pattern on Steens Mountain is characterized by high spring flow with low flows during the remainder of the year. The waters of the Donner und Blitzen River system have been placed on the 303(d) list for water quality concerns by the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality for exceeding temperature standards for cold water fish (redband trout).

2. Wetlands and Riparian Zones

Riparian and wetland resources have been identified throughout the subject area. The streams and associated riparian areas on public land have been inventoried; these reaches were found to be either in a state of Proper Functioning Condition or functioning at-risk with an upward trend. Common riparian species include aspen, willow, alder, redosier dogwood, chokecherry, sedges, rushes, and grasses.

3. Wild and Scenic Rivers

Ankle Creek, Mud Creek, Indian Creek, and the South Fork Donner und Blitzen River are the affected segments of the Donner und Blitzen WSR. All segments of the WSR are designated as "Wild." The Outstandingly Remarkable Values (ORVs) identified for the Donner und Blitzen River and its tributaries include Scenic, Geologic, Recreational, Fisheries, Wildlife, Vegetation, and Cultural (Historic). The ORVs are described in the Donner und Blitzen National Wild and Scenic River Management Plan.

4. Wilderness Values

a. Naturalness:

The portions of the Wilderness that could be affected are in outstanding natural condition. Some unnatural features exist throughout, including corral remnants, fences, troughs, juniper cuts, and abandoned jeep roads. This portion of the Wilderness is also closed to livestock grazing permits. The Ankle Creek route is basically a primitive two-track suitable for high clearance vehicles traveling at slow speeds (see Appendix A photographs). Many years prior to the passage of the Steens Act, portions of the route were maintained to a higher standard with heavy equipment. Conversations with local landowners indicate the Berrington Trail was built in the 1960's for trailing cattle and has not been passable by motor vehicles for many years. Most of the trail is located on lands that the BLM acquired after the Wilderness inventory process. The top portion of the trail on public land was not identified as a motorized route in the BLM WSA inventory of the area.

b. Solitude:

Opportunities for solitude and natural quiet are enhanced by the area's remoteness along with a varied and rugged topography. Shallow drainages, vegetative screening provided mainly by juniper trees, and the vast landscape contribute to a visitor's sense of seclusion.

c. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation:

Opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation are outstanding throughout and include day hiking, backpacking, horseback riding, hunting, fishing, and photography.

d. Supplemental Wilderness Values:

Special features enhancing the area's Wilderness values include geology, vegetation, wildlife, and scenic qualities.

5. Noxious Weeds

Noxious weeds, such as spotted knapweed, Canada thistle, and bull thistle have been observed in the vicinity of the inholdings. Presently, these weed populations are small and isolated with no locations on or adjacent to the subject routes.

6. Migratory Birds

Approximately 70 species of migratory birds have been identified in the vicinity of the inholdings and the Ankle Creek route. Although none are listed as Threatened or Endangered under the Endangered Species Act, several are BLM Special Status Species. These species include sage sparrow, olive-sided flycatcher, willow flycatcher, black-throated sparrow, loggerhead shrike, and black rosy finch. Nesting season for migratory birds in this area would be from about April 15 to July 15 each year.

7. Special Status Fauna

Redband trout and Malheur mottled sculpin inhabit Indian Creek, Mud Creek, Ankle Creek, and the Donner und Blitzen River. An Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) aquatic habitat survey was completed on the public land portions of Ankle and Mud Creeks in the summer of 2002. Results indicate that the streams overall are lacking in streamside vegetation to provide adequate shade to the stream channel, which may result in higher water temperatures and larger fluctuations in daily temperature than if more shade was present. Mud Creek and the upper part of Ankle Creek have moderate to high amounts of eroding streambank, which in part is contributing to sediment in the stream channel.

The streams also have a high width-to-depth ratio (i.e., they are wide and shallow), and have lower pool frequency and overall pool area than is desired for high quality fish habitat.

Bighorn sheep inhabit the east rim of the Steens in the vicinity of the Berrington Trail.

B. Noncritical Elements

The following noncritical elements may be affected by one or more of the alternatives: recreation, visual resources, vegetation, and wildlife.

1. Recreation

Recreation activities in this portion of the Wilderness include hunting, hiking, primitive camping, backpacking, and horseback riding. Typically, snow limits access into this area in the late fall, winter, and early spring. Most use occurs from mid-May to early November, with the majority of use being hunting by foot or horse. Prior to Wilderness designation, public access along the road included use by motor vehicles. Foot and horse traffic is currently light but is expected to increase.

2. Visual Resources

The Steens Mountain Wilderness is classified as Visual Resource Management (VRM) Class I. The Class I VRM objective is to preserve the existing character of the landscape. This class provides for natural ecological changes; however, it does not preclude very limited management activity. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be very low and must not attract attention. Most of the Ankle Creek route was a well-defined two-track road at the time of Wilderness designation. The elimination of public motorized use since June 2001, has allowed portions of the route to revegetate making it less conspicuous in places.

3. Vegetation

Common vegetation species in the area includes mountain big sagebrush, low sagebrush, aspen, Thurber's needlegrass, Idaho fescue, squirreltail, tailcup lupine, Hood's Phlox, hairy paintbrush, and western juniper. Plant species in the riparian areas consist of willow, alder, dogwood, sedges, rushes, and other riparian species. Prior to the Wilderness designation, prescribed burns were conducted over a portion of the project area aimed at increasing vegetation diversity.

4. Wildlife

Wildlife common to the area include mule deer, elk, pronghorn antelope, badger, coyote, mountain lion, jackrabbit, cottontail rabbit, pocket gopher, vole, other small mammals, golden eagle, red-tailed hawk, kestrel, turkey vulture, Cooper's hawk, mourning dove, American robin, northern flicker, sage thrasher, Brewer's sparrow, vesper sparrow, rock wren, green-tailed towhee, dusky flycatcher, many other migratory birds, amphibians, and reptiles. The area serves as summer habitat for deer and elk with some elk wintering in the vicinity of the Donner und Blitzen River during mild winters.

5. Soils

Soil texture in the area is primarily Stoney Clay loam. In the past, heavy rain events and snowmelt has caused loss of soil along some of the routes' steeper slopes exposing more of the rock component.

6. Social and Economic Values

Access to one's private property is important to most landowners. Equally important is one's concept of Wilderness and the ability to experience nature in a natural setting. Reasonable access tries to accommodate private landowner needs while minimizing impacts to Wilderness.

One attribute of determining property value is degree of access. In some situations as access becomes restrictive, property values decrease. In other situations, private inholdings within Wilderness actually increase in value. In general, access to private land within Wilderness is more restrictive than access to private land in nondesignated areas. Prior to the Steens Wilderness designation, access to these inholdings was managed under casual use which essentially allowed unrestricted access to the properties by the landowners during the season when the routes were open and as long as damage to the public lands did not result. Casual use access is not a long-term option across designated Wilderness.

CHAPTER IV: ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

A. Critical Elements

1. Water Quality

Alternative A

Limited to no effects on water quality are anticipated by this action. The continued use of stream crossings may preclude establishment of vegetation that contribute to buffering water temperature. However, the limited extent of these areas, number and width of crossings, would likely result in no measurable effect on stream temperature. Sediment stirred up by vehicles crossing these waterways would remain suspended in the water column for short periods of time and should settle out within a short distance of the crossings, having limited effects on water quality.

Alternative B

There would be no effects from this alternative on water quality since there would be no motorized or mechanized vehicles/equipment crossing Indian, Mud or Ankle Creeks.

Alternative C

Same as Alternative A.

Alternative D

Vehicle crossings of Indian and Mud Creeks would likely be reduced as access to the Stroemple inholdings would be primarily from the south. Ankle Creek crossings may increase if the more southern Stroemple parcel is acquired by the BLM due to improved convenience of access to the remaining inholding via the Berrington Trail. If the northern parcel is acquired, Mr. Stroemple would have no need to cross Ankle Creek when accessing the remaining inholding via the Berrington Trail. In either case, impacts to water quality would be the same as described under Alternative A.

2. Wetlands and Riparian Zones

Due to the limited extent of roads associated with riparian areas, there would be no anticipated effects to the status and function of riparian/wetland communities.

3. Wild and Scenic Rivers

The Geologic, Fisheries and Cultural (Historic) ORVs would not be affected by any of the alternatives. Refer to Section IV B. for the impact discussions on visual (scenic), vegetation, and wildlife resources. Impacts to the Recreation ORV are as follows:

Alternative A

Recreation - The quality of the recreation experience associated with the WSR at Newton Cabin, along Mud Creek where the route parallels and crosses the creeks, and where the routes cross Ankle Creek could be affected by the sights and sounds of motor vehicles in the wild river corridors.

Alternative B

WSR ORVs would not be affected by this alternative.

Alternative C

Recreation - Recreation visitors in close proximity to the Indian Creek, Mud Creek, and Ankle Creek crossings could experience a higher frequency of motorized use than Alternative A. Motorized activity at both Ankle Creek crossings would be less than Alternative D if BLM acquired the southern Stroemple inholding but more if BLM acquired the more northern Stroemple inholding, assuming use of the Berington Trail was authorized. The quality of the recreation experience associated with the WSR at all the crossings would be affected by the sights and sounds of motor vehicles in the wild river corridors.

Alternative D

Recreation - Ankle Creek crossing with 4-wheeler ATVs on private and public land would likely increase if Mr. Stroemple retains his inholding in Sections 8 and 9. Ankle Creek crossings on public land would cease and motorized contacts at Newton Cabin and Mud Creek crossings would be less than Alternatives A and C if BLM acquired the parcel in Sections 8 and 9.

4. Wilderness Values

Alternative A

The Wilderness values of naturalness and opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation would be impaired or diminished along and in proximity to 8.6 miles of the Ankle Creek route by the occasional sights, sounds, and other evidence of motorized vehicles within the Wilderness. Natural revegetation of the vehicle route would be inhibited by occasional vehicle traffic. Evidence of tire tracks and crushed vegetation along the route would have a negative effect on most visitors' perception of naturalness. Some Wilderness visitors in the project area would encounter motor vehicles, however, implementing all or some of the mitigating measures (Chapter V.) would reduce the chances of unwanted encounters. This alternative could reduce access levels below Alternatives C and D to the benefit of Wilderness resource values.

Temporary periodic impacts would include engine noise, dust, and other sounds and sights coming from vehicles traversing the route. The effects that temporary sights and sounds from motorized vehicle operation could have on an individual Wilderness visitors' perception of naturalness, solitude opportunities, and primitive recreation experiences will vary with the sensitivity of the person to such circumstances. It is assumed that most visitors to this Wilderness do not expect to directly encounter or hear motorized vehicles. Some visitors would be quite bothered while others would be less affected. Other Wilderness users would not notice or observe the sights and sounds of motorized activity and would experience no loss in their Wilderness experience.

The natural conditions of quiet a visitor expects to encounter in Wilderness would be diminished for some visitors when vehicles negotiate the route. These effects would be limited to the local area surrounding the route.

Alternative B

The Wilderness values of naturalness and opportunities for solitude could still be impaired or diminished. It is assumed that saddle and pack stock would be used to transport people, equipment, and materials in place of motor vehicles and while saddle and pack stock is generally considered a compatible activity with Wilderness, these packing operations may have impacts on naturalness. The natural revegetation of the vehicle route would be slowed by repeated trampling of hooves but the anticipated degree of use would still allow natural recovery of most of the route. Soil churning and gouging by hooves would be evident in places along the trail and horse or mule fecal material may be considered offensive to some people. It is assumed the elimination of motor vehicle encounters and evidence would be welcomed by most Wilderness visitors.

Alternative C

The Wilderness values of naturalness and opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation would be impaired or diminished along and in proximity to the entire 17-mile Ankle Creek route by the sights, sounds, and other evidence of motorized vehicles within the Wilderness. This alternative's motorized portion of the Ankle Creek route is shown on Inholder Map 3. The natural revegetation of the vehicle route may be arrested and reversed, however, the route would not be allowed to become more apparent than it was at the time of Wilderness designation. The route could appear to casual observers as a road receiving regular and continuous use. Evidence of tire tracks and crushed vegetation along the route would have a negative effect on most visitors' perception of naturalness. Some Wilderness visitors in the project area would encounter motor vehicles, however, implementing all or some of the mitigating measures (Chapter V.) would reduce the chances of unwanted encounters. Wilderness visitors in the project area would be more likely to encounter a vehicle compared to the other alternatives.

Temporary, yet repeated, impacts would include engine noise, dust, and other sounds and sights emanating from a vehicle traversing the vehicle route. The effects that temporary sights and sounds from motorized vehicle operation within the project area could have on an individual Wilderness visitors' perception of naturalness, solitude opportunities, and primitive recreation experiences will vary with the sensitivity of the person to such circumstances. It is assumed that most visitors to this Wilderness do not expect to directly encounter or hear motorized vehicles. Some visitors would be quite bothered while others would be less affected. Other Wilderness users will not notice nor observe the sights and sounds of motorized activity and would experience no loss in their Wilderness experience.

The natural conditions of quiet a person expects to encounter in Wilderness would be diminished for some visitors when vehicles negotiate the route. These effects would be limited to the local area surrounding the route.

Alternative D

The Wilderness values of naturalness and opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation would be impaired or diminished along and in proximity to 19.5 miles of the Ankle Creek and Berrington Trail routes by the occasional sights, sounds, and other evidence of motorized vehicles within the Wilderness. Since a majority of the trips into the Stroemple inholding is expected to be from the south, the Ankle Creek route between the Berrington Trail junction and the Stroemple inholding would receive more use under this alternative and the Ankle Creek route north of the inholdings less use. Total number of motorized trips into the Wilderness is anticipated to increase relatively moderately based on the convenience of using the Berrington Trail. Natural revegetation of the vehicle routes would be inhibited to a similar degree as described under Alternative C, with vehicle use of the Ankle Creek route north of the inholdings appearing less used and the portion of the route south of the inholdings to the Berrington Trail junction appearing more used. The occurrence of Wilderness visitors encountering motor vehicles would be similar to Alternative A.

Temporary periodic impacts would include engine noise, dust, and other sounds and sights emanating from vehicles traversing the routes. The effects that temporary sights and sounds from motorized vehicle operation could have on a Wilderness visitor's perception of naturalness, solitude opportunities, and primitive recreation experiences will vary with the sensitivity of each person to such circumstances. It is assumed that most visitors to this Wilderness do not expect to directly encounter or hear motorized vehicles. Some visitors would be quite bothered while others would be less affected. Implementing all or some of the mitigating measures (Chapter V.) would reduce the chances of unwanted encounters. Other Wilderness users would not notice nor observe the sights and sounds of motorized activity and would experience no loss in their Wilderness experience.

The natural conditions of quiet people expect to encounter in Wilderness would be diminished for some visitors when vehicles negotiate the routes. These effects would be limited to the local area surrounding the routes.

5. Noxious Weeds

All Alternatives

The potential for establishment of new noxious weed infestations increases with amount of motorized activity. The use of domestic horses not using weed-free hay or pellets also has the potential of introducing noxious weeds to the area. Existing noxious weeds may also be spread by the passage of vehicles.

6. Migratory Birds

Alternative A

The effects of this alternative on migratory birds would be the probable flushing of birds from the nest during the nesting season. The disturbance would be of short duration and should not cause nest abandonment. Most disturbance would be confined to birds nesting within approximately 10 feet either side of the road. Due to snow, high water, and wet road conditions, this area would probably not be accessible until May 15 each year and possibly later, depending on the year, therefore, a portion of the nesting would be finished prior to vehicles accessing the area.

Alternative B

There would be no effects from this alternative on migratory birds from motorized or mechanized vehicles/equipment accessing this area. Some birds nesting within 10 feet of Ankle Creek would be temporarily disturbed from horseback access but this disturbance would be short in duration may be less than that from motorized access.

Alternative C

Although the frequency of disturbance in this alternative would increase to a daily basis at the maximum, the effects of this alternative on migratory birds would be similar to those of Alternative A.

Alternative D

The effects of this alternative on migratory birds would be similar to those described in Alternative A.

7. Special Status Fauna

Alternatives A and C

The effects to redband trout and Malheur mottled sculpin are associated with water quality and physical disturbance. As discussed in water quality, the potential effects would be localized and limited. Physical disturbance of redband trout spawning sites could occur but is a matter of conjecture. Due to the limited scope and likelihood of these potential impacts, the action is not anticipated to effect the populations of these species.

Alternative B

There would be no adverse effects from this alternative on redband trout or Malheur mottled sculpin since there would be no motorized or mechanized vehicles/equipment crossing Indian, Mud or Ankle Creeks.

Alternative D

Effects to redband trout and Malheur mottled sculpin would be essentially the same as Alternatives A and C. Bighorn sheep may be disturbed by the use of ATVs and other human activities along the Berrington Trail and may relocate to avoid the disturbance. Mortality or injury to bighorn sheep is not expected to occur.

B. Noncritical Elements

1. Recreation

Alternative A

Recreation users of the route from Newton Cabin to Ankle Creek could see and experience up to 16 motorized vehicles per week. This would affect the recreation experiences of the users, who would not expect to see motor vehicles in a primitive recreation setting. There could be some avoidance of the travel routes by big game animals and wildlife, thereby affecting hunting and wildlife viewing opportunities.

Alternative B

Recreation users may notice some increased horse and foot traffic from Newton Cabin south to Ankle Creek, but generally, the inholder access use would not be distinguishable from the public or commercial recreation use. Hunting and wildlife viewing opportunities would not be affected.

Alternative C

Recreation users of the area could see and experience motorized vehicles more frequently than in Alternative A. This would affect the recreation experiences of the users, who would not expect to see motor vehicles in a primitive recreation setting. Motorized vehicle use could cause big game animals and other wildlife to avoid the travel routes, thereby affecting hunting and wildlife viewing opportunities.

Alternative D

Recreation users of the area could see and experience motorized vehicles similar to Alternative A. This would affect the recreation experiences of the users, who would not expect to see motor vehicles in a primitive recreation setting. Also, recreation users would be similarly affected by use of ATVs on the Berrington Trail. Motorized vehicle use could cause big game animals and other wildlife to avoid the travel routes, thereby affecting hunting and wildlife viewing.

2. Visual Resources

Alternative A

The routes from Newton Cabin to the private land parcels in the Ankle Creek drainage would be maintained as two-track roads by the passage of motor vehicles. Natural revegetation of all or portions of these routes would be inhibited with most portions of the route showing obvious signs of vehicular activity. Natural revegetation would occur on the routes south and east of the lower Ankle Creek crossing in Section 36, T. 34 S., R. 32¾ E. VRM Class I objectives could be met.

Alternative B

Natural revegetation of all or portions of closed roads could occur; however, saddle and pack stock trails may be evident along portions of the route. Visual quality would improve in the interior of the Wilderness and an overall improvement to visual resources would result. VRM Class I objectives would be met.

Alternative C

All the routes identified for motorized use on Inholding Map 3 would be maintained as two-track roads by the passage of motor vehicles and portions of the routes could become more evident. Natural revegetation of all or portions of these routes would not occur. VRM Class I objectives could be met.

Alternative D

The standard of all the routes identified for motorized use on Inholding Map 4 would be kept as two-track roads by the passage of motor vehicles and portions of the routes could become more evident. Natural revegetation of all or portions of these routes would not occur. The Berrington Trail would become more visually evident through the crushing of vegetation and the exposure of soils. VRM Class I objectives could be met.

3. Vegetation

All Alternatives

Vegetation along established routes would be crushed by the motorized vehicles. Nonwoody species, especially grasses, could survive and establish in the center portion of the route; however, vegetation would be inhibited where tires regularly track along the route. Impacts to vegetation would be a key monitoring element when determining route condition. Vegetation cover would be maintained at or above levels that existed at the time of Wilderness designation. Vegetation may be less likely to establish and survive under the degree of use proposed for Alternative C.

4. Wildlife

All Alternatives

Wildlife close to the route would be disturbed by motorized and nonmotorized human activity. The amount of disturbance would be relative to the amount of use along the route as described for each alternative. Disturbance would be temporary for most species, however, some animals may relocate to areas away from the route. Mortality or injury is not expected to occur to any wildlife species due to motorized use under any of the alternatives except those associated with hunting activities.

5. Soils

All Alternatives

Soil loss is currently evident along the steeper slopes of the routes. Small to large rocks are common where the loss of soil has occurred. In general, soil stability along the routes would be improved relative to the amount of vegetation that is established on the routes. Soil stability should improve from pre-Wilderness designation levels under all alternatives due to the closure of motorized access to the general public.

6. Social and Economic Values

All Alternatives

All alternatives describe more restrictive access than predesignation levels. Section 114 (c) of the Steens Act provides for no loss of property value when selling land or providing easements to the Federal government. Still, private real estate transactions may be impacted by the fact the private lands are surrounded by Wilderness and that access and use of the properties may be restricted. To date, post designation land sales in the Wilderness area have not resulted in a decrease in property values.

Alternative B

The costs to the landowners of accessing the inholdings with saddle and pack stock would increase under this alternative due primarily to the extra time involved in reaching the parcels. For example, using horses to access the Fisherman property in place of motorized vehicles is estimated to cost an additional $177 for each daily round trip. Nonmotorized access costs would be expected to increase for extended (overnight) visits and when supplies and equipment are transported to the properties.

Alternative D

Sale of one of the Stroemple parcels to the BLM would decrease Harney County tax revenues by approximately $75 per year.

C. Cumulative Impacts

All Alternatives

Access to other inholdings along the east face of Steens Mountain above the town of Andrews and within the Home Creek unit of the Steens Mountain Wilderness would have similar effects to Wilderness naturalness and solitude. It is anticipated that the degree of use authorized for the Ellis and Stroemple inholdings would affect future motorized use requests in other portions of the Steens Mountain Wilderness Area, however, reasonable access would still be based on each individual inholding's need. Proximity to existing routes, past modes of access and other regulatory criteria are included when determining reasonable access.

Other activities affecting Wilderness include the use of a helicopter by the ODFW to conduct wildlife census, and the use of a helicopter by BLM to conduct wild horse census and to conduct horse capture as needed. These additional motorized activities are being analyzed in the Wilderness Management Plan that is included in the RMP currently underway in the Andrews Resource Area. These activities, along with the activities described under the alternatives in this EA, could have an additive effect on visitors' perceptions of naturalness, solitude, and primitive recreation experiences. Motorized use in this portion of the Wilderness area may cause visitors to avoid the area thereby concentrating human impacts in other portions of the Wilderness. Conversely, providing an enjoyable Wilderness experience in the Ankle Creek area should attract visitors to this vicinity thereby reducing impacts in other portions of the Wilderness.

Natural revegetation of the Ankle Creek route would continue to be inhibited by the effects of accessing the inholdings (soil compaction, poor water infiltration) for as long as the use is authorized.

Repeated displacement of wildlife by motor vehicle passage would continue for as long as the use is authorized. Motor vehicle disturbances may result in the permanent movement of some wildlife from the areas near the access routes. Some wildlife habitat would be permanently lost if structures are built on private land, and some wildlife would tend to avoid the area when humans are present on the property.

Alternative B

Using saddle and pack stock to access the inholding combined with the public's use of this same mode of transport, would cause additive impacts typically associated with using horses, mules, etc. It could be reasonably expected that other private property owners within the Steens Mountain Wilderness would also end up with nonmotorized access. This type of access even when combined with the public’s stock use, would still enhance Wilderness values throughout the Wilderness area.

Alternative D

Berrington Trail Maintenance - A reduction of one inholding with a conservation easement on another would provide long-term stability regarding the management of the parcels in a manner that enhances Wilderness characteristics. The sale of a parcel to BLM or a conservation easement may also stimulate similar actions within the Wilderness resulting in improved Wilderness management.

CHAPTER V: POSSIBLE MITIGATING MEASURES

1. Provide advanced notification of motorized use to inform hikers of potential encounters with motorized vehicles.

2. Identify motorized routes within the Wilderness on public recreation maps so visitors can hike away from the routes if desired.

3. Provide information at major entry points to inform hikers of potential or occurring motor vehicle activity.

CHAPTER VI: MONITORING

1. BLM will use photographs to monitor the current character of the routes to assure that widening and deepening of the existing tread marks does not occur and so the routes do not otherwise become more highly developed than authorized. Vegetation and soil disturbance outside the existing tread width is not authorized. If routes change to a condition that is more highly developed than what existed in October 2000, the BLM will make adjustments to vehicle access to restore the routes to their previous condition. Maintenance necessary to maintain the landowner's reasonable access or to protect or enhance Wilderness values, may be conducted by the BLM or authorized by the BLM and conducted by the landowners or lessee and may require disturbance beyond the current tread width in order to prevent degradation of the route, e.g., ditching water off the route to reduce soil erosion and channeling. Refer to Appendix A for examples of monitoring photographs taken of the Ankle Creek route.

2. BLM will make personal contacts and distribute visitor satisfaction forms to Wilderness visitors and will maintain a visitor contact box near the Ankle Creek route access point at the Indian Creek gate. BLM will consider the information including the degree of dissatisfaction that can be attributed to encounters with vehicles and take necessary action to lessen the degree of dissatisfaction. Some reported dissatisfaction will merely be from the prudent and proper use of vehicles along the routes. Adjustments to lessen the problems with vehicle encounters will be considered when excessive operation of the vehicles causes impacts to Wilderness values.

3. BLM will be present during road maintenance activities and approve any use of mechanized equipment.

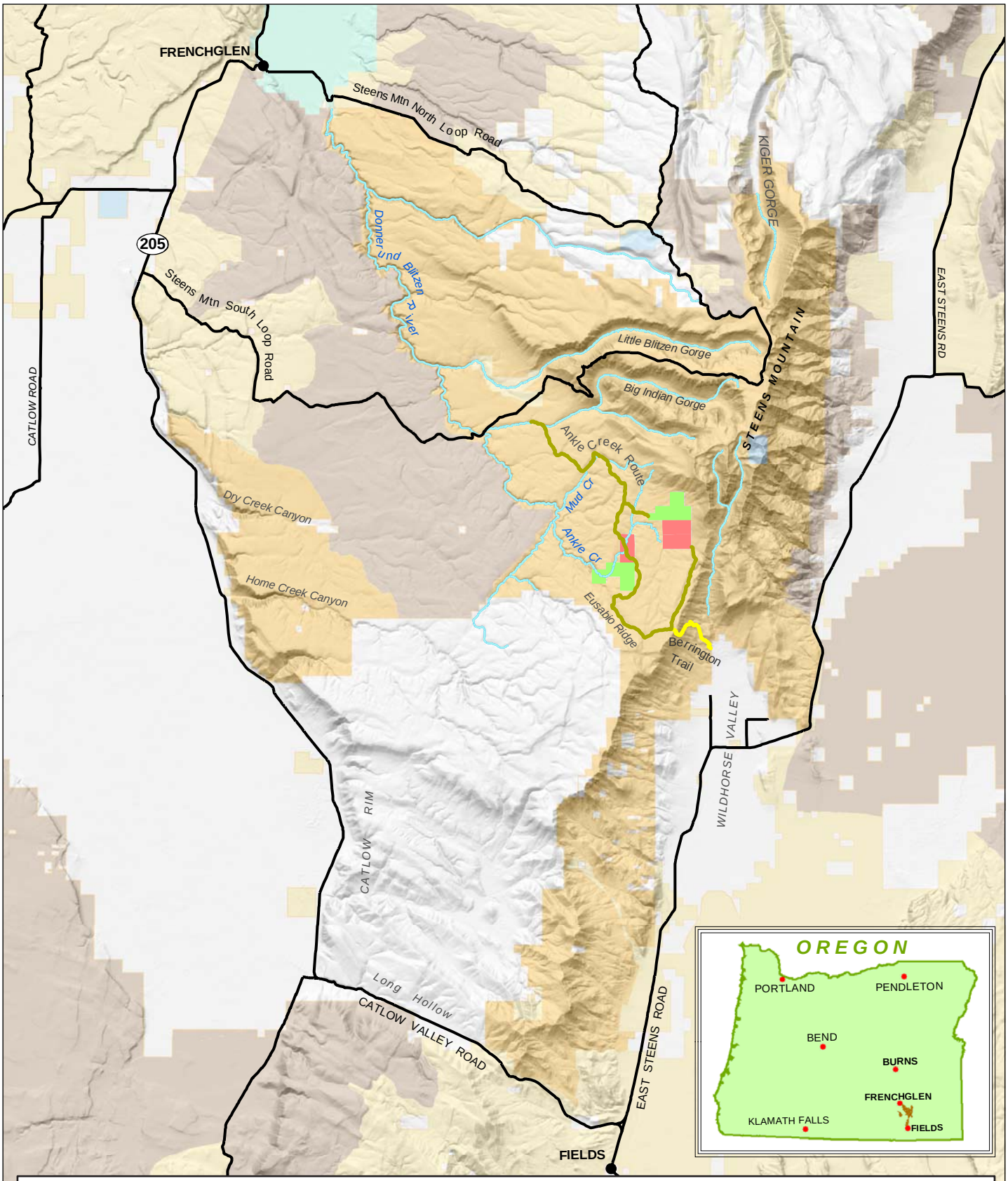
4. Landowners and/or lessees will submit annual use reports showing dates of access, modes of access, number of vehicles and persons, public contacts, etc.

5. Electronic counters may be placed at strategic locations to aid in determining the degree of use along the Ankle Creek route.

CHAPTER VII: CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

A. List of Preparers

Darren Brumback, Fisheries Biologist
Gary Foulkes, Planning and Environmental Coordinator
Rick Hall, Natural Resource Specialist (Botanist)
Doug Linn, Botanist (Soils)
John Neeling, Wilderness Specialist
Matt Obradovich, Wildlife Biologist
Mark Sherbourne, Natural Resource Specialist
Evelyn Treiman, Outdoor Recreation Planner



Legend

- Stroemple Inholdings
- Ellis Inholdings
- Major Roads
- Berrington Trail
- Ankle Creek Route
- Wild and Scenic River
- BLM Administered Land
- BLM Wilderness
- BLM Wilderness Study Area
- Private Land
- State Land
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Land

General Vicinity Map

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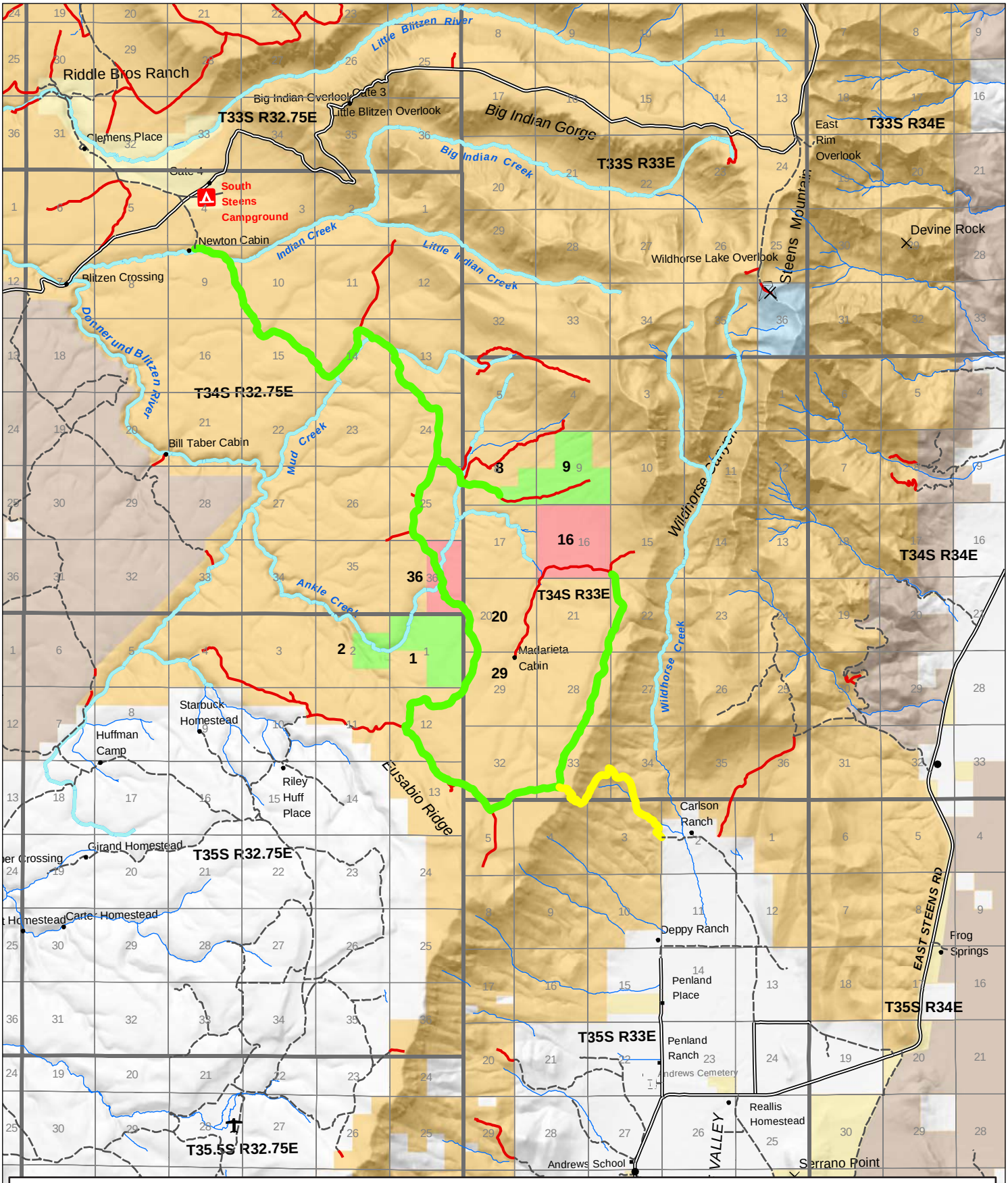

Inholding Map 1

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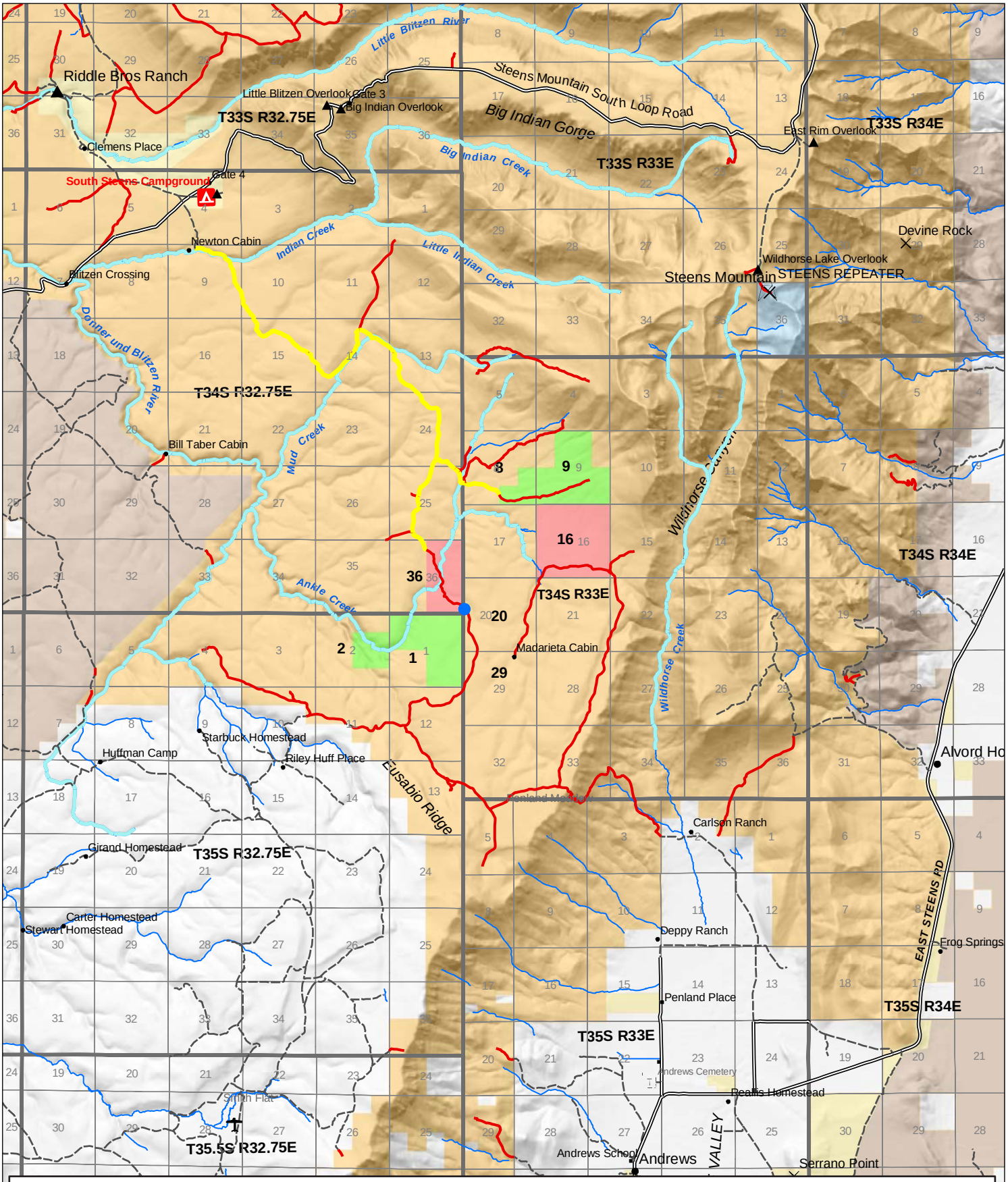
Riddle Bros Ranch
Little Blitzen River
Little Blitzen Overlook
Gate 3
Big Indian Overlook
Steens Mountain South Loop Road
Big Indian Gorge
T33S R32.75E
T33S R33E
T33S R34E
East Rim Overlook
Clemens Place
Big Indian Creek
South Steens Campground
Gate 4
Newton Cabin
Indian Creek
Little Indian Creek
Devine Rock
Wildhorse Lake Overlook
STEENS REPEATER
Steens Mountain
Blitzen Crossing
Donner und Blitzen River
T34S R32.75E
Bill Taber Cabin
Mud Creek
Wildhorse Canyon
T34S R34E
Ankle Creek
T34S R33E
Madarieta Cabin
Wildhorse Creek
Starbuck Homestead
Huffman Camp
Riley Huff Place
Eusabio Ridge
Alvord Ho
Penland Meadow
Carlson Ranch
Girand Homestead
T35S R32.75E
Carter Homestead
Stewart Homestead
Deppy Ranch
EAST STEENS RD
Frog Springs
Penland Place
T35S R34E
T35S R33E
Andrews Cemetery
Smith Flat
Reallis Homestead
T35.5S R32.75E
Andrews School
Andrews
VALLEY
Serrano Point
Serrano Point Ranch
Chet Curry Ranch
Whisky Hill
Legend
Stroemple Inholdings
Ellis Inholdings
Non-Paved Improved Road
Primitive or Unknown Road Condition
Closed Roads except where crossing Private Land
Perennial Streams
Wild and Scenic River
BLM Administered Land
BLM Wilderness
BLM Wilderness Study Area
Private Land
State Land
Motorized Segment 8.6 Miles
Stroemple Parking Area
Inholding Map 2
Alternative A
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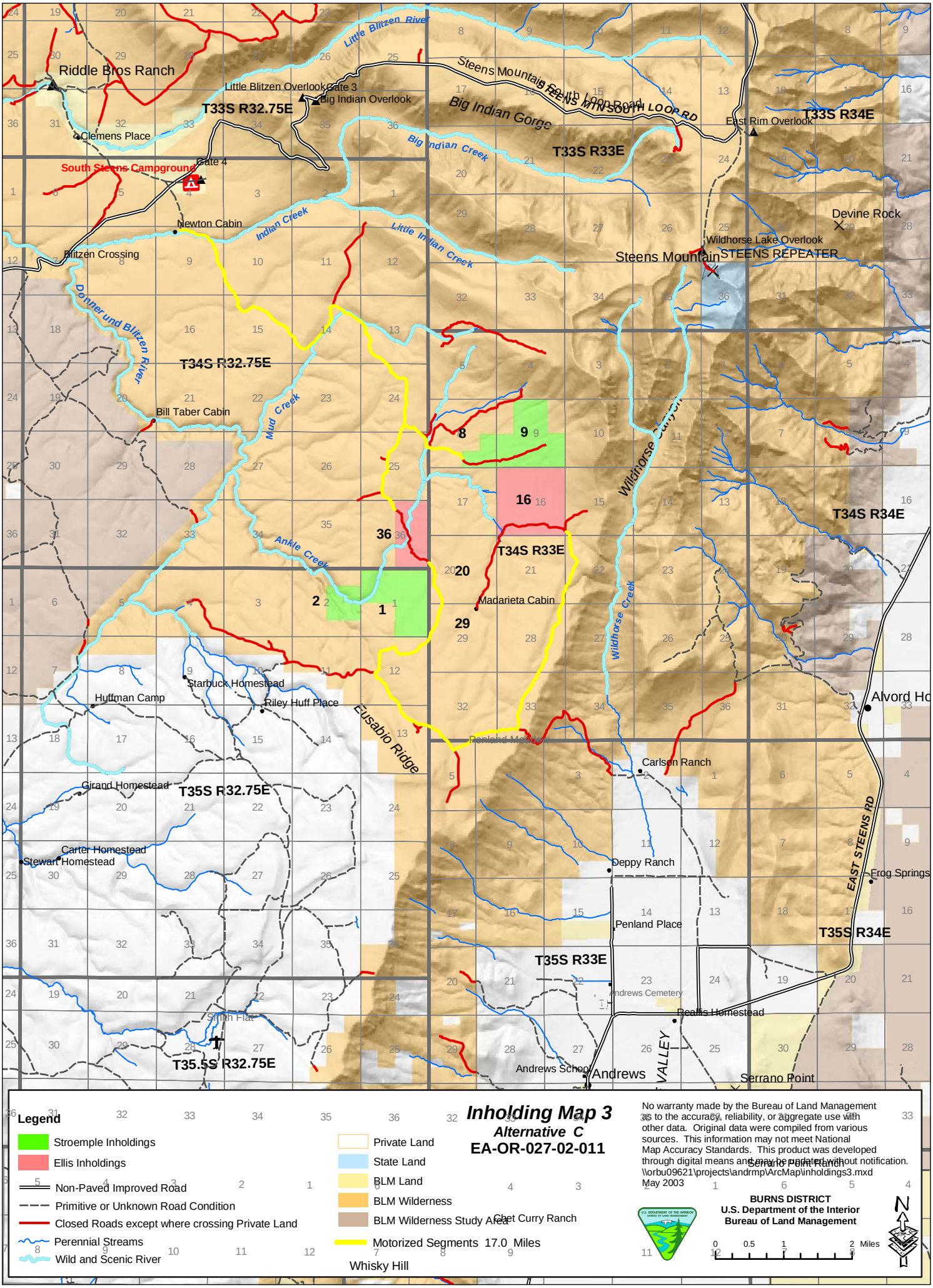
Riddle Bros Ranch
Little Blitzen River
Little Blitzen Overlook
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Big Indian Overlook
T33S R32.75E
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STEENS MTN SOUTH LOOP RD
Big Indian Gorge
Big Indian Creek
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Frog Springs
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T35S R33E
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Andrews School
Andrews
Serrano Point
Chet Curry Ranch
Whisky Hill
Legend
Stroemple Inholdings
Ellis Inholdings
Non-Paved Improved Road
Primitive or Unknown Road Condition
Closed Roads except where crossing Private Land
Perennial Streams
Wild and Scenic River
Private Land
State Land
BLM Land
BLM Wilderness
BLM Wilderness Study Area
Motorized Segments 17.0 Miles
Inholding Map 3
Alternative C
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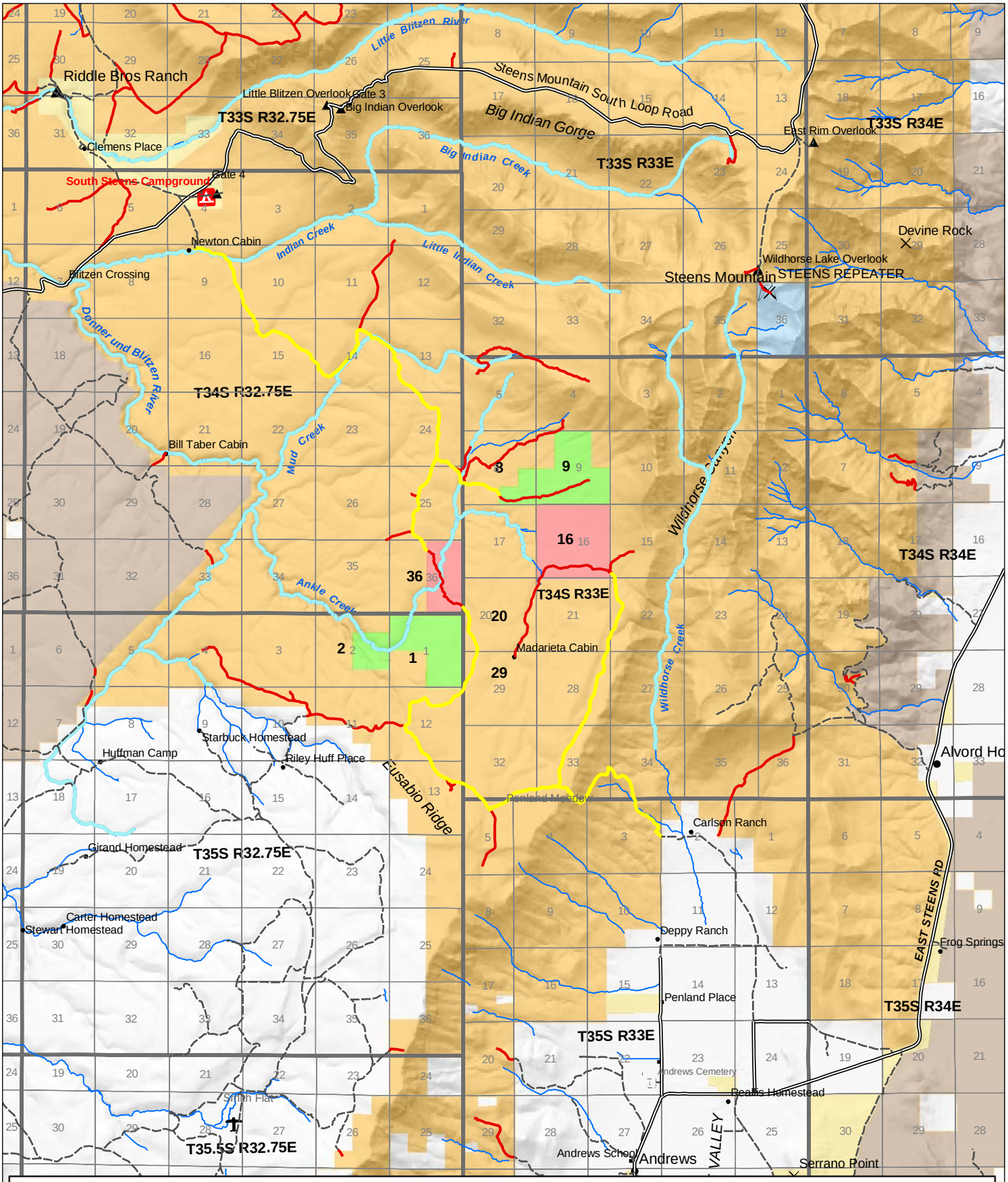
Riddle Bros Ranch
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Little Blitzen Overlook
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Steens Mountain South Loop Road
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T33S R33E
T33S R34E
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STEENS REPEATER
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T35S R33E
Andrews Cemetery
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Andrews School
Andrews
VALLEY
Serrano Point
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Whisky Hill
Legend
Stroemple Inholdings
Ellis Inholdings
Non-Paved Improved Road
Primitive or Unknown Road Condition
Closed Roads except where crossing Private Land
Perennial Streams
Wild and Scenic River
BLM Administered Land
BLM Wilderness
BLM Wilderness Study Area
Private Land
State Land
Motorized Segments 19.5 Miles
Inholding Map 4
Alternative D
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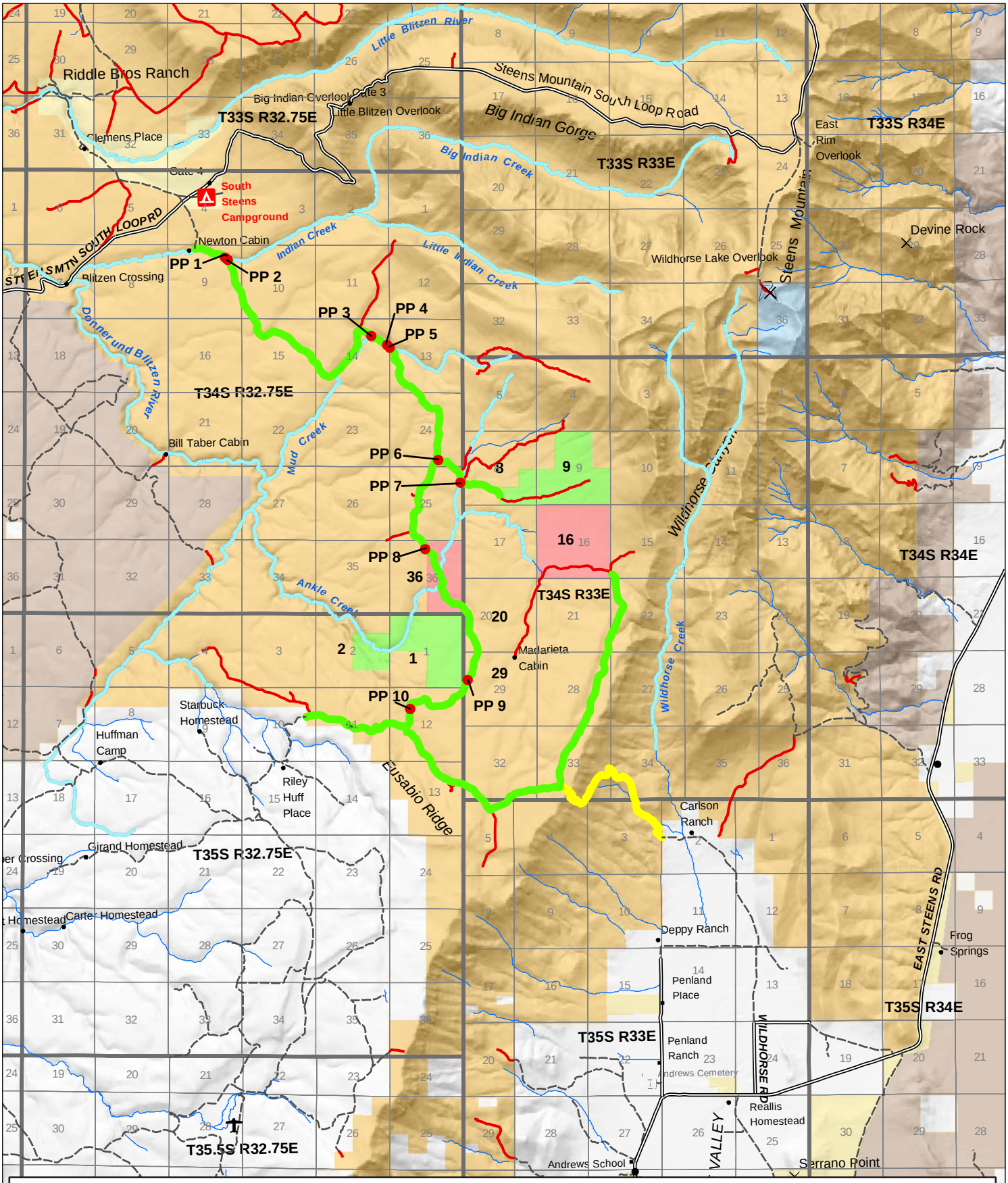

Legend

- Stroemple Inholdings
- Ellis Inholdings
- Non-Paved Improved Road
- Primitive or Unknown Road Condition
- Closed Roads except where crossing Private Land
- Berrington Trail (Closed)
- Ankle Creek Route (closed except where crossing Private Land)
- Wilderness Road Monitoring Photo Points (PP 1 to 10)
- Perennial Streams
- Wild and Scenic River
- BLM Administered Land
- BLM Wilderness
- BLM Wilderness Study Area
- Private Land
- State Land

Appendix A

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Road Monitoring Photo Point 1

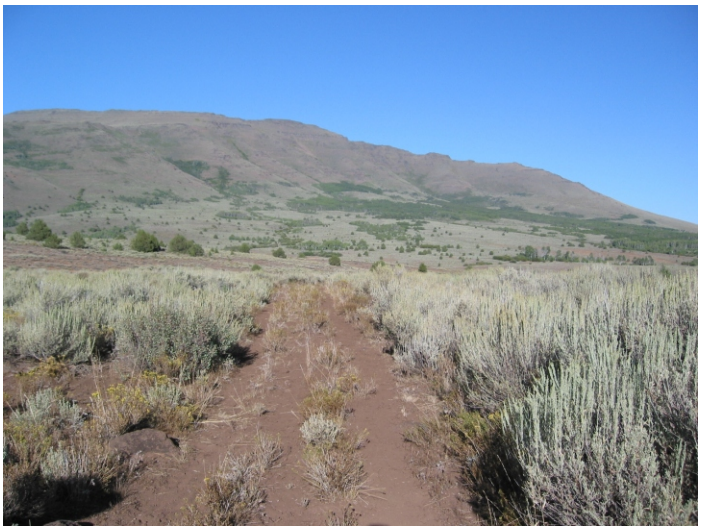
Road Monitoring Photo Point 2

Road Monitoring Photo Point 3

Road Monitoring Photo Point 4

Road Monitoring Photo Point 5

Road Monitoring Photo Point 8



Road Monitoring Photo Point 6

Road Monitoring Photo Point 7

Road Monitoring Photo Point 9

Road Monitoring Photo Point 10