

111-17 BRUNEAU RIVER

The April 1980 proposed decision included the following evaluation of wilderness characteristics.

SIZE AND PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS:

The unit contains 134,062 acres of BLM land in a long irregular configuration, 37 miles long and from 1/2 to 13 miles wide with nine state inholdings. The heart of the unit is located 15 miles northeast of Grasmere. The unit lies on a relatively flat volcanic tableland sharply dissected by the major drainages of the Bruneau River, East Fork Bruneau River, and Sheep Creek. The drainages are typified by deep vertical-walled canyons with numerous spires, columns, and large flaring cracks. The bottoms of these canyons vary in width from 30 feet to over one-quarter of a mile. The vertical walls of the canyons reach as much as 800 feet in height. Vegetation is dominated by northern desert shrub communities with juniper occurring in the canyon bottoms.

NATURALNESS:

The northwestern portion of the unit is crisscrossed with numerous ways, a bladed fence line, and a low-standard road. The northern neck downstream from the confluence of the Bruneau River and the East Fork of the Bruneau River has a number of ways penetrating from both the east and west boundaries to the rim of the canyon. The mid-eastern periphery of the unit contains a concentration of ways and low-standard roads just south of the confluence of the Bruneau River and the East Fork of the Bruneau River. The southeast periphery has several short dead-end low-standard roads, ways, fence lines and stock reservoirs. The southwest and mid-south portions also have a number of ways penetrating to the rim of the canyons from the west and south boundaries.

Despite the number of man's imprints much of the unit appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature. The large size of the unit, the wide distribution of the imprints and the lack of topographic relief in affected areas (which permits low sagebrush vegetation to effectively screen the imprints of man from short distances) renders the imprints substantially unnoticeable except where they are highly concentrated: in the plateau regions in the northernmost portion of the unit, the eastern periphery of the unit south of the confluence of the Bruneau River with the East Fork Bruneau River, between Sheep Creek and the Bruneau River in the southernmost portion of the unit, and northwest of the confluence of Sheep Creek with the Bruneau River. These concentrations of roads, ways, and range developments should be trimmed from further consideration. In addition, a substantial way running northeast-southwest through the plateau region in the western portion of the unit cuts off about 7,680 acres of land. This way is considered a significant linear intrusion. Because of the lack of outstanding opportunities on the plateau to the west of the way, the acreage should be trimmed from further consideration.

SOLITUDE:

The low shrubby vegetation dominating the unit offers minimal vegetative screening. The juniper and riparian vegetation in the canyon bottom offers fair to good vegetative screening. The flat terrain of much of the unit also offers only minimal topographic screening. However, the deep, meandering, vertical-walled canyons of the Bruneau, East Fork Bruneau, and Sheep Creek offer excellent topographic screening in narrow corridors running the entire length of the unit. Because of the scenic quality of these canyons, they would tend to concentrate visitors within the narrow corridor and increase the potential for visitor contacts. Despite the general lack of vegetative screening and the corridor effect of the canyon, the large size of the unit combined with the length of the canyons and their excellent topographic screening affords outstanding opportunities for solitude.

PRIMITIVE AND UNCONFINED RECREATION:

Primitive recreation opportunities within the unit are primarily associated with the Bruneau River Canyon and Sheep Creek Canyon, and include whitewater rafting and kayaking, backpacking, camping, sightseeing, nature photography, rock hounding, fishing, and wildlife viewing. The recreational opportunities are considered outstanding because of the exceptional and unusual natural features and recreational attractions in the Bruneau River and Sheep Creek Canyons. There is significant mental and physical challenge associated with whitewater and backpacking opportunities within the canyons.

SUPPLEMENTAL VALUES:

The Bruneau River and Sheep Creek canyon are of exceptional scenic and geological value. The Bruneau River and Sheep Creek have cut deep and extremely narrow vertical-walled canyons into an uplifted volcanic tableland. Perhaps nowhere else in the United States can be found canyons of this magnitude that are so narrow in relation to their depth and possess such numerous and diversified rock formations. Scenic vistas from the rims of the canyons

are breathtaking. The Bruneau River Canyon is also of exceptional scientific and cultural value with over 200 known pre-historic sites in the canyon. The Bruneau River and Sheep Creek are currently under consideration by Congress for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River System. The unit contains red-banded trout and otter habitat, important mule deer winter range and potential bighorn sheep habitat.

REHABILITATION:

A large portion of the unit is sufficiently natural in character to qualify as a Wilderness Study Area. However, it may be possible to further remove the imprints of man from portions of the unit by hand labor or natural regeneration. Rehabilitation potential will be considered in detail during the study phase of the wilderness review process.

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PUBLIC COMMENT SUMMARY:

Of the comments received that specifically addressed Unit 111-17, over 80% were in support of the proposed decision to identify the unit as a study area and the remainder against further consideration of the unit as wilderness.

Of the comments supporting a study area, most were in favor of an area of 107,020 acres as in the proposed decision, while several recommended including 27,042 acres which had been dropped from wilderness consideration. Specific reasons given for supporting study area identification included the following:

- The large size and few influences make this spectacular canyon and river system and surrounding lands an outstanding natural area. The few light ways in the area would be naturally reclaimed once the area is closed to motorized use.
- Opportunities for solitude are outstanding due to the size, lack of external influences, and canyons.
- Opportunities for primitive recreation are outstanding due to the diverse wilderness activities available (hiking, fishing, river floating). The unit is relatively close to Idaho's largest population and can be used year-round for recreation.
- The unit has exceptional or outstanding supplemental values, including unique geological features, fantastic scenery, great variety of wildlife, and many archaeological and historical sites. Wildlife values, geological features, and scenery were the most frequently mentioned supplemental reasons for identifying the unit as a study area.

Those who opposed any further wilderness consideration gave the following reasons:

- Fences, roads, and livestock water developments are noticeable; it would be difficult to erase these signs of man's impact.
- Solitude is only available in the canyons, and solitude in the northern part of the unit is disrupted by low flying jets from Mountain Home Air Force Base and by the use of flares by the Air Force during the night.
- The unit is very dangerous for recreation use and can be utilized only by young, strong individuals. Drinking water is very scarce.
- Large areas have been included which are not pertinent or adjacent to the canyons. The area should be left alone and managed under multiple use with livestock management on the flats and canyons.
- Several that opposed study area identification proposed that the canyon be managed as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern, while one recommended that the pending designation of a National Wild and Scenic River would be sufficient to protect resource values in the canyons.

COMMENT EVALUATION:

Roadless/Naturalness:



Over 80% of the respondents who specifically addressed Unit 111-17 supported the preliminary finding that 107,020 acres appear to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature. Those opposed to study area identification stated that

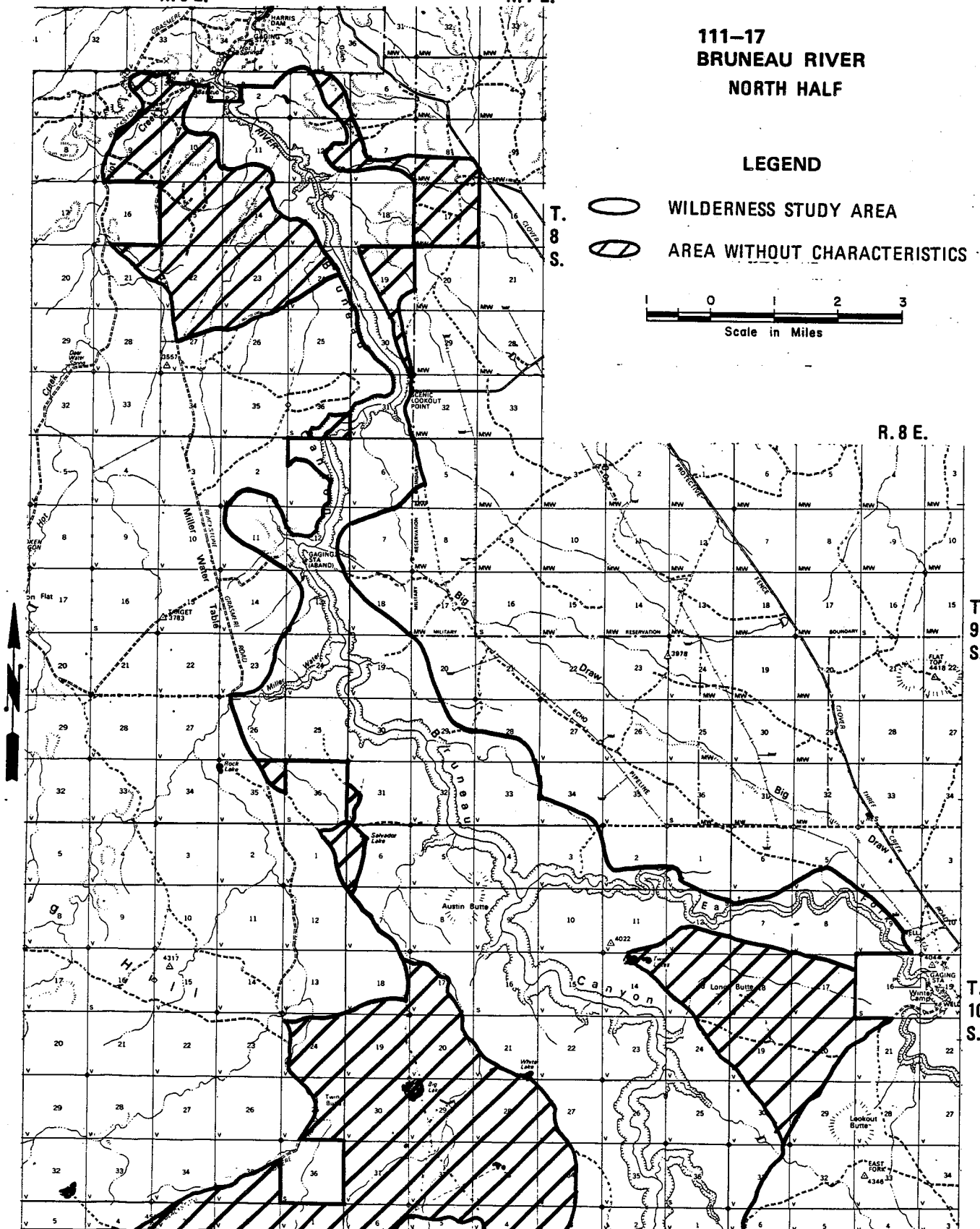
R. 6 E.

R. 7 E.

111-17 BRUNEAU RIVER NORTH HALF

LEGEND

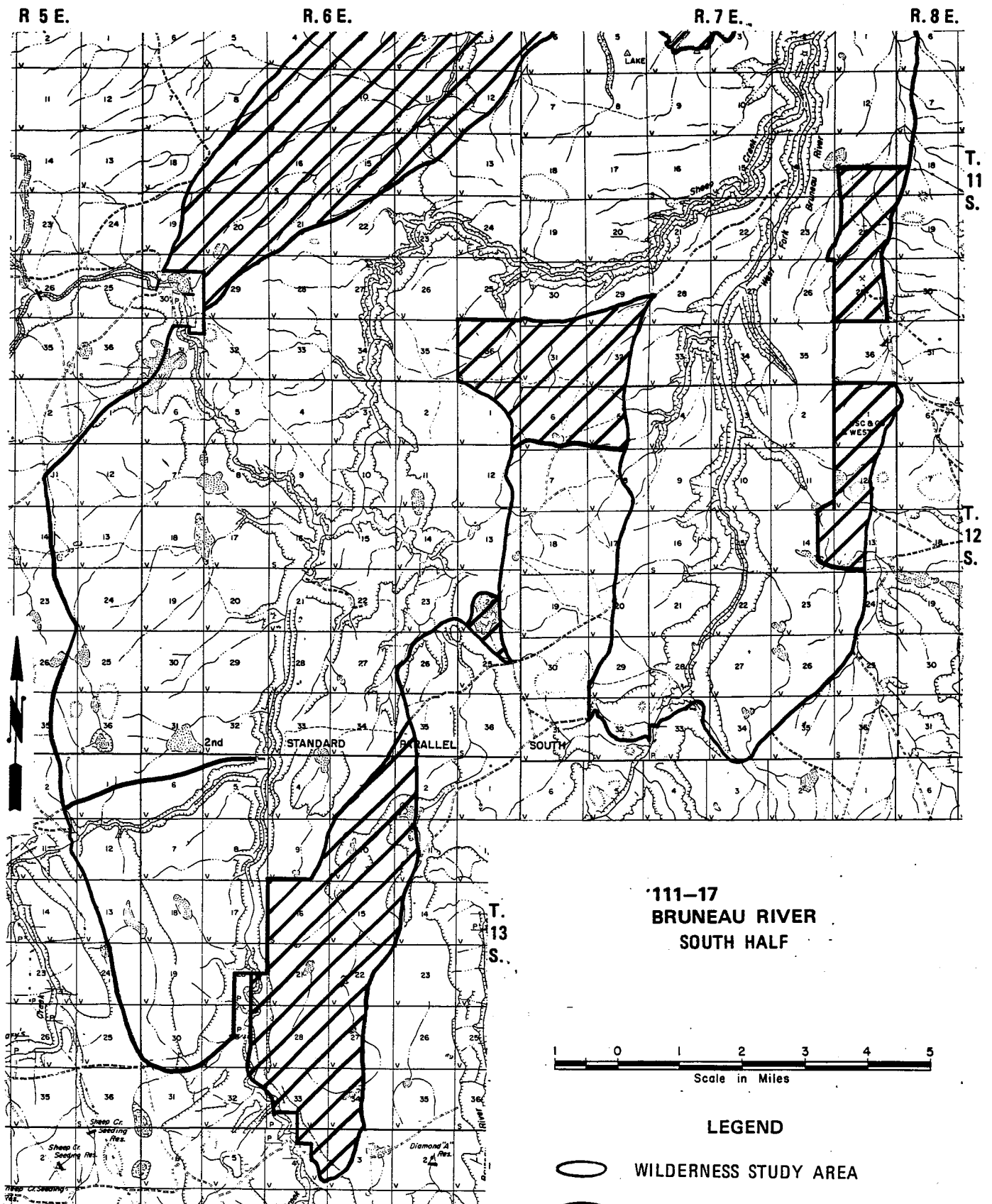
-  WILDERNESS STUDY AREA
-  AREA WITHOUT CHARACTERISTICS



R. 8 E.

T. 9 S.

T. 10 S.



there are several roads, fences, and livestock water developments in the unit. These vehicle routes have been field-checked by the BLM and identified as ways rather than roads because they show no sign of construction or maintenance by mechanical means and are 2-wheel tracks with vegetation between the tracks. The imprints of man are so widely distributed over a large area that they are substantially unnoticeable, and encounter by users would be brief and infrequent. After field checks, a way in the southwest portion of the unit is now classed as a road for a distance of approximately three miles.

The reference to rehabilitation in the proposed decision was to areas that already met the naturalness criteria, not to areas that did not.

Solitude:

Several respondents stated that solitude can only be found in the canyons and that solitude within the northern part of the unit is frequently interrupted by low-flying military jets and by the nighttime use of flares for military purposes. Low-flying aircraft do effect the solitude, but the impact is temporary. If through the study process, it is recommended that this unit be designated as wilderness, the BLM could negotiate with the Air Force to alter the flight patterns of their aircraft to eliminate or minimize the impact. The use of flares occurs outside of the unit and would not be noticeable from within the canyon. The solitude of a small amount of plateau lands in the northern part of the unit would be impacted by the nighttime use of flares some five miles to the east.

The lack of topographic relief and taller vegetation limits the opportunity to achieve solitude on plateau lands unless the area involved is large enough to allow the blending of other visitors or external influences into the landscape, and/or the plateau is dissected by miles of deep, meandering draws and canyons. The large size of this unit, numerous miles of canyons and draws, and freedom from external influences (an exception being military operations affecting the northern portion) offers outstanding opportunities for solitude.

Primitive Recreation:

The combination of plateau lands, deep canyons, and rivers make this an outstanding area for primitive recreation activities. The Bruneau River is nationally known for its excellent whitewater boating, and the area offers a variety of other activities within a scenic setting, such as backpacking, camping, photography, rock hounding, fishing, hunting, and wildlife viewing.

The canyon areas are extremely rugged and the Bruneau River provides a challenging whitewater boating experience. Properly equipped and experienced people of good health should have little difficulty in safely using the canyon areas, but the remote and rugged terrain can prove hazardous to those not prepared. The lack of palatable drinking water is not a serious limitation to recreation use since water sources can be chemically treated or boiled to provide safe drinking water. Sufficient water can be carried across plateau areas.

Conflicting Resource Values:

Those opposed to identifying the unit as a study area propose that the area be managed as it presently is with possible protection of the canyon itself as a National Wild and Scenic River or as an area of critical environmental concern. Either designation could protect the canyon from rim to rim, but through wilderness study the proposed wild river could be complimented by protecting important recreation, wildlife, cultural, and other resources within side canyons and on roadless and natural plateau areas adjacent to canyons.

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DECISION:

No new information was received through public comments that would warrant a change in the decision. A unit of 107,020 acres is identified as a Wilderness Study Area, as it meets the naturalness and the solitude-recreation criteria.