

Bear Den Butte Wilderness Study Area

1. The Study Area -- 9,700 acres

The Bear Den Butte WSA (ID-57-14) is located in Minidoka and Blaine Counties 23 miles southeast of Carey, Idaho. The WSA includes 9,700 acres of BLM-administered lands. There are no split estate lands or inholdings within the area (see Table 1). The WSA's boundaries are formed by the following dirt roads: on the west by BLM Road 3407, The West Thumb Road; on the north by an unnamed nonsystem road; on the east by BLM Road 3406, The Thumb Cross Road; and on the south by BLM Road 405, The East Thumb Road. The boundary also follows a property line around one state-owned section.

The Bear Den Butte WSA is characterized by two distinct landforms. The edges of the WSA are composed of an older lava flow covered by wind-deposited soils up to five feet deep. Topography is flat to gently rolling, broken by occasional buttes and dry lakes. In the center of the WSA, a younger lava flow overlies the rolling topography. This "aa" (the Hawaiian word for "hard on the feet") lava flow has clinkery and jagged surfaces and contains a variety of holes, blisters, pressure ridges and collapse features. The northern boundary road separates this thumb of lava from the main Craters of the Moon lava flow. Elevations in the WSA range from 4,500 feet in the WSA's southwest corner to 5,104 feet at Bear Den Butte.

Vegetation varies according to the topography. The soil-covered older lava flow is dominated by brush with interspersed grasses and forbs. The young lava flow supports almost no vegetation.

The WSA was studied under Section 603 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) and included in the Monument Final Environmental Impact Statement, (EIS) Wilderness, filed in July 1987. Two alternatives were analyzed in the EIS: a no wilderness alternative, which is the recommendation of this report; and an all wilderness alternative.

2. Recommendation and Rationale

0 acres recommended for wilderness

**9,700 acres recommended for
nonwilderness**

The recommendation for the Bear Den Butte WSA is to release all 9,700 acres for nonwilderness uses. The environmentally preferable alternative is the all wilderness alternative. It would cause the least change from the natural environment over the long term. The recommendation would use all practical means to avoid or minimize adverse environmental impacts.

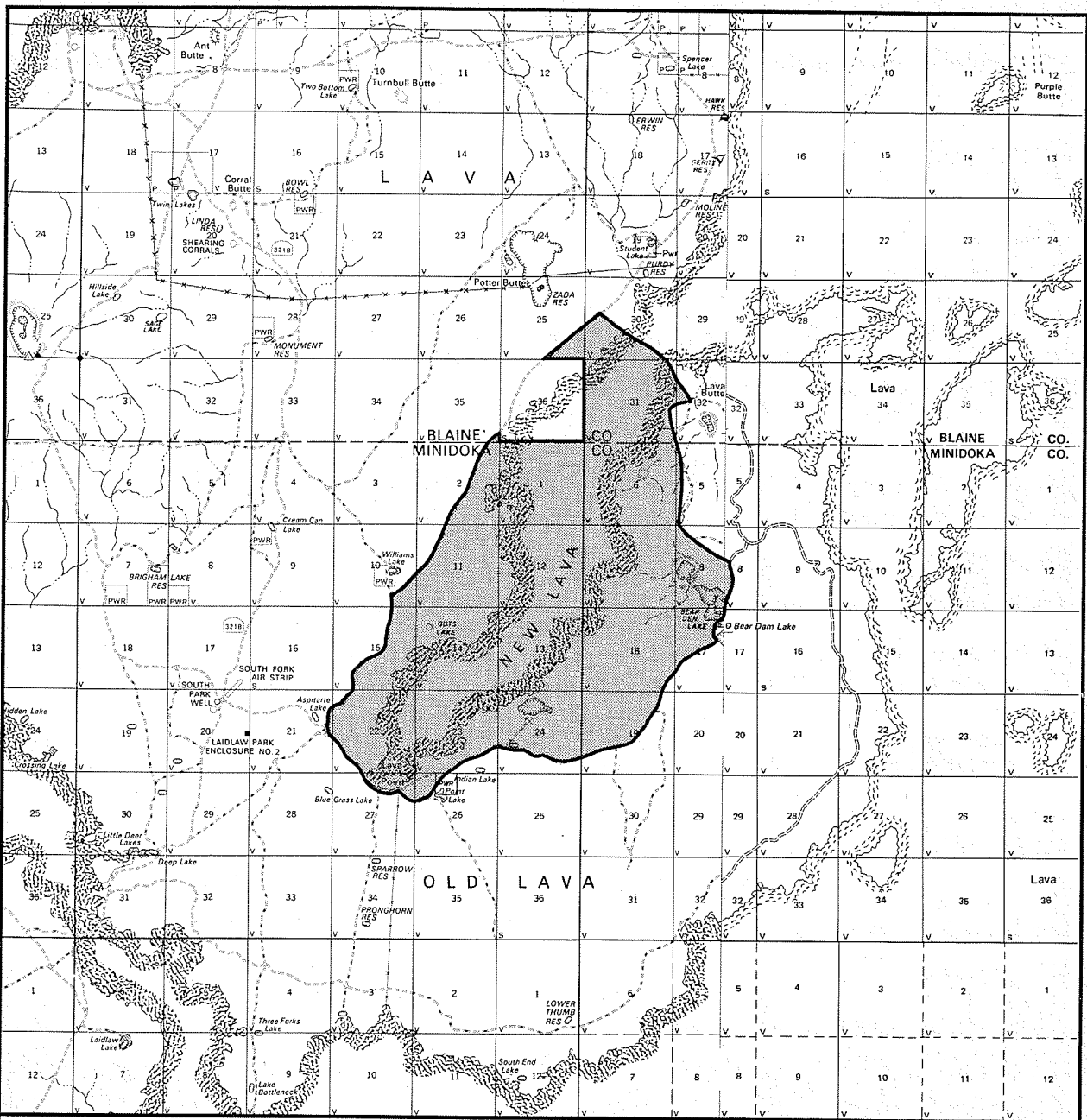
All 9,700 acres of federal land within the WSA are recommended nonsuitable for wilderness designation and are shown as the Bear Den Butte WSA on the Bear Den Butte Proposal map.

The quality of wilderness values was the key consideration in the recommendation. While the WSA contained the wilderness values necessary for study, they are not considered to merit inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation system. The Bear Den Butte WSA would not add diversity to the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS) and does not exhibit any significant or unusual features. Opportunity for solitude available in the WSA is similar to those afforded by thousands of acres of land, primarily lava flows, which are adjacent to the WSA. These opportunities are due to the remoteness and lack of human activity in the area and are not due to any intrinsic values unique to the WSA. The WSA does not offer outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation.

Although the Bear Den Butte WSA offers opportunities to study the vegetative and geologic features of a young aa lava flow, similar ecosystems and geologic features of higher wilderness quality are recommended for wilderness designation within the Great Rift and Raven's Eye WSAs.







The Great Rift (355,850 acres) and Raven's Eye (67,110 acres) WSAs contain ecosystems and geologic features similar to those in the Bear Den Butte WSA. The Great Rift and Raven's Eye WSAs, however, have higher quality wilderness values because of their large size, greater diversity of lava flow features and vegetation and reduced human influence. Recommendation of these WSAs as wilderness adequately represents the Snake River Plain desert lava flow ecosystems in the NWPS. The Great Rift and Raven's Eye WSAs also provide much higher quality opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation than does the Bear Den Butte WSA.

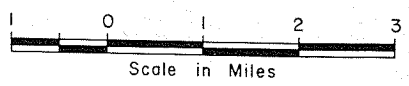
The no wilderness recommendation would result in less impact on livestock operations within the Bear Den Butte WSA. Permittees would be allowed to continue using vehicles to inspect and maintain existing range developments and to construct a new fence. In contrast, under wilderness management, permittee labor costs for construction, repair and inspection of range developments within the designated wilderness would increase by 50 percent due to restrictions on vehicle use. The no wilderness recommendation would also allow prescribed burning of 1,340 acres in the area for brush control. Wilderness designation would preclude prescribed burning.



R. 23 E. | R. 24 E.

R. 24 E. | R. 25 E.

- | | | | |
|---|---|---|--------------|
|  | RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |  | SPLIT ESTATE |
|  | RECOMMENDED FOR NONWILDERNESS |  | STATE |
|  | LAND OUTSIDE WSA RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |  | PRIVATE |



ID-57-14
BEAR DEN BUTTE
PROPOSAL

APRIL 1988

T. 2 S.
 T. 3 S.

T. 3 S.
 T. 4 S.

**Table 1 -- Land Status and Acreage Summary of the Study Area
BEAR DEN BUTTE WSA**

Within Wilderness Study Area

BLM (surface and subsurface)	9,700
Split Estate (BLM surface only)	0
Inholdings (state, private)	0
 Total	 9,700

Within the Recommended Wilderness Boundary

BLM (within WSA)	0
BLM (outside WSA)	0
Split Estate (within WSA)	0
Split Estate (outside WSA)	0
 Total BLM Land Recommended for Wilderness	 0
 Inholdings (state, private)	 0
 State land (outside WSA)	 0

Within the Area Not Recommended for Wilderness

BLM	9,700
Split Estate	0
 Total BLM Land Not Recommended for Wilderness	 9,700
 Inholdings (state, private)	 0

3. Criteria Considered in Developing the Wilderness Recommendations

Wilderness Characteristics

A. Naturalness

The Bear Den Butte WSA is natural in appearance but there are several site-specific signs of man that impact the area including four vehicle trails (total length of two miles), two short fences (totaling less than one mile), 100 acres of fire rehabilitation seeding and a stock water pond. These imprints are located on the eastern, western and southern edges of the WSA. Although screened by vegetation and topography, the developments slightly reduce natural values in the older lava flow parts of the WSA. The outside sights and sounds of traffic on the WSA's boundary roads also slightly impact natural values in the older lava flow.

B. Solitude

The WSA provides outstanding opportunities for solitude. The area's topographic variety, vegetation, remoteness and proximity to the Great Rift WSA combine to provide numerous outstanding opportunities for solitude.

A boundary road surrounds the WSA. Vehicles on this road are visible from the fringes of the WSA. The boundary road and any traffic on it can also be seen or heard from the WSA's higher elevations. The impact of the road is insignificant.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

The Bear Den Butte WSA provides a variety of recreation opportunities. The rugged volcanic features and desert environment of the WSA provide outstanding opportunities for camping, hiking and hunting. Recreational use of the WSA is estimated at less than 100 visitor days annually. The combination of rugged terrain and lack of water or destination spots probably accounts for the low visitor use figures. Visitation to the area usually occurs in the spring and fall.

D. Special Features

The Bear Den Butte WSA does not contain any unique or significant special features.

Diversity in the National Wilderness Preservation System

A. Assessing the Diversity of Natural Systems and Features as Represented by Ecosystems

Wilderness designation of the Bear Den Butte WSA would add an ecosystem not presently represented in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). This ecosystem is represented by one designated area with 30,245 acres. There are 11 other BLM areas in the state under study with this ecosystem. This information is summarized in Table 2.

TABLE 2

Ecosystem Representation

Bailey-Kuchler Classification	<u>NWPS Areas</u>		<u>Other BLM Studies</u>	
	areas	acres	areas	acres
Intermountain Sagebrush Province				
<u>NATIONWIDE</u>				
Desert-Vegetation Largely Absent Ecosystem	1	30,245	12	870,403
<u>IDAHO</u>				
Desert-Vegetation Largely Absent Ecosystem	1	30,245	11	646,687
<u>NEVADA</u>				
Desert-Vegetation Largely Absent Ecosystem	0	0	1	223,716

B. Expanding the Opportunities for Solitude or Primitive Recreation within a Day's Driving Time (Five Hours) of Major Population Centers

The Bear Den Butte WSA is within a five-hour drive from Boise, Idaho. Table 3 summarizes the number and acreage of designated areas and other BLM study areas within a five-hour drive of the population center.

Table 3

Wilderness Opportunities for Residents of Major Population Centers

Population Centers	<u>NWPS Areas</u>		<u>Other BLM Studies</u>	
	areas	acres	areas	acres
Boise, Idaho	16	4,741,570	141	5,374,250

C. Balancing the Geographic Distribution of Wilderness Areas

The Bear Den Butte WSA would not contribute to balancing the geographic distribution of areas within the NWPS. The NPS-administered Craters of the Moon Wilderness (43,243 acres), representing a similar land form and ecosystem, is located ten miles to the northeast. Designation of the Bear Den Butte WSA as wilderness would not help balance the geographic distribution of opportunities to attain diverse wilderness experiences.

Manageability

The Bear Den Butte is manageable as wilderness. The size of the WSA, proximity to the Great Rift WSA and distance from population centers combine to create a manageable area.

Management problems from unauthorized uses such as mineral extraction or ORV use are not expected. Restrictions on fire management activities in a wilderness setting would not result in significant changes in fire frequency or size in the Bear Den Butte area.

Contribution of existing livestock operations in the same manner and degree represents a minor wilderness manageability conflict.

The sights and sounds of vehicles on two vehicle trails near Bear Den Butte would degrade opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation. The two trails are used to tow sheep camps into two bed grounds and deliver supplies from April 16 to June 15 and from October 16 to December 15. Although visitor use to the Bear Den Butte WSA usually occurs in the spring and fall and the Butte is a feature of particular interest, the area affected by sheep camp related vehicle use is less than ten percent of the WSA. Impacts on solitude and primitive recreation in the entire WSA would be negligible.

Energy and Minerals Resource Values

The Bear Den Butte WSA has no petroleum potential. Although the WSA is classified as prospectively valuable for geothermal resources (BLM 1985), further study indicates the WSA has low potential based on indirect evidence and mineral data (Frederickson and Fernette 1983). The WSA has low potential for locatable and saleable minerals.

The mineral estates in the WSA are in federal ownership and are open to mineral entry. There are no mining claims or mineral leases within the WSA.

Impacts on Resources

The following comparative impact table summarizes the effects on pertinent resources for all the alternatives considered including designation or nondesignation of the entire area as wilderness.

Table 4
Comparative Summary of the Impacts by Alternative
WSA ID-57-14 (BEAR DEN BUTTE)

ISSUE TOPICS	PROPOSED ACTION (NO WILDERNESS/NO ACTION)	ALL WILDERNESS ALTERNATIVE
Impacts on Wilderness Values	<p>The combination of existing recreational ORV use and livestock management related vehicle use would slightly reduce natural values and opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation in the vegetated areas of the older lava flows along the periphery of the WSA.</p> <p>Low-use vehicle trails would be maintained by ORV travel with the possibility of being expanded slightly. However, no increase in visitor use is projected above current levels. Impacts would be limited to existing trails.</p>	<p>All wilderness values would receive long-term Congressional approval. Wilderness values would be maintained on all 9,700 acres of the Bear Den Butte WSA. Sheep camp related vehicle access would adversely affect opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation from April through mid-June in less than 10% of the WSA. Elimination of vehicle use for access to range developments and elimination of recreational ORV use would slightly enhance wilderness values.</p>
Impacts on Livestock Grazing Operations	<p>Existing cattle and sheep grazing practices would continue. Existing range development maintenance would continue. Construction of 0.6 mile of fence would occur as planned.</p>	<p>Existing cattle and sheep grazing practices would continue. Permittees' labor costs for construction, repair and inspection of range developments within the WSA boundaries would increase by 50% due to wilderness management restrictions on vehicle use.</p>
Impacts on Fire Management	<p>There would be no impact on fire management.</p>	<p>Full suppression including use of pumper trucks and helicopters within the WSA would not occur. Fire size and frequency would not be significantly affected.</p>

Local Social and Economic Considerations

Social and economic factors were not considered a significant issue in the study.

Summary of WSA-Specific Public Comments

Public involvement has occurred throughout the wilderness review process. During public review of the Draft EIS, a total of eight comments supporting wilderness designation were received. Six of these contained no supporting reasons. The two comments with supporting reasons cited the area's wilderness opportunities, scenic values, proximity to the Great Rift WSA, native vegetation, wildlife habitat and lack of resource conflicts.

The U.S. Department of Energy, Bureau of Recreation, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, National Park Service, U.S. Department of Transportation, Environmental Protection Agency and the Idaho's Department of Fish and Game, Department of Health and Welfare, Department of Lands, Transportation Department, Department of Water Resources and Idaho State Historical Society commented on the Draft EIS. None of their comments specifically addressed the Bear Den Butte WSA.