

BLUEBELL WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 55,665 acres

The Bluebell WSA (NV-010-027), located approximately 95 miles east of Elko, Nevada and 10 miles southwest of West Wendover, Nevada in the Toano Range, is oblong in shape - approximately 14 miles long and eight miles wide. Dirt roads form most of the WSA's boundary; the Morgan Pass Road on the south and unnamed dirt roads on the east and west. Private lands form the northern boundary, except a ¼ mile section of dirt road. There are no split estate lands or private inholdings.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE -

0 acres recommended for wilderness

55,665 acres recommended for nonwilderness

The entire WSA is recommended for nonwilderness because of mineral potential, the possible expansion of a limestone quarry, and less than outstanding wilderness values in the northern part of the WSA. Also considered was the wilderness recommendation for the Goshute Peak WSA, immediately south of this WSA, which better represents the outstanding wilderness values of this mountain range.

The northern portion of the WSA is not recommended for wilderness because of possible expansion of the nearby limestone quarry. The limestone is of high quality and expansion of the existing quarry is likely following release of the adjacent lands.

The southern portion of the WSA is not recommended for wilderness because of good potential for metallic minerals. Approximately 9,500 acres contain identified disseminated gold resources and high and moderate potentials for disseminated gold. It is expected that these minerals will be developed and the wilderness values lost. The need to allow for exploration and development of potential gold resources outweighs the wilderness values. The no wilderness recommendation for the southern portion of the WSA removes the area with the highest wilderness values. Wilderness values north of the mineralized area become more subdued as elevations decrease.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The WSA consists of steep, mountainous terrain, with many canyons radiating from the central ridgeline of mountain peaks. At the lower elevations, the area supports a pinyon-juniper ecosystem, while small stands of mixed conifers and bristlecone pine can be found at the higher elevations. Elevations range from 5,300 to over 8,000 feet. All of the WSA, except about 30 acres in the foothills, is free of man's imprints. Manmade features include approximately 20 miles of ways, eight miles of cherrystem roads, four corrals, one mile of barbed wire fence, two developed springs and ten small pit reservoirs.

B. Solitude: Outstanding opportunities for solitude exist within the WSA. The WSA is extremely rugged with high mountain peaks and many drainages. This highly dissected topography provides many outstanding opportunities for solitude. Drainages on the WSA's west side are rocky and rugged, while the east-side drainages are densely wooded.

Topographic and vegetative screening enhances the outstanding solitude. The WSA contains about 15 drainages and hundreds of small canyons with moderately dense stands of pinyon pine, limber pine, Utah juniper, white fir, and mountain mahogany.

Military aircraft sometimes disrupt the solitude. A Military Training Route, used for low-level, high-speed exercises, and a Military Operations Area cover the WSA. Flight elevations vary, but aircraft fly as low as 100 feet above ground level. Disruption of the silence, which contributes to the feeling of solitude, is still infrequent. At times, aircraft can be seen and/or heard all day. Other times, one can travel for days and not see or hear a military jet.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: The Bluebell WSA has outstanding recreation opportunities throughout most of the WSA. These include backpacking, hiking, wildlife observation, photography, rock climbing, and fossil collecting.

D. Special Features: From late August through mid-October each year, thousands of raptors migrate south past these mountains. Raptor species seen include golden and bald eagles, red-tailed hawks, northern goshawks, peregrine falcons, American kestrels, and Cooper's hawks. Bristlecone pine trees, some of the oldest living things known, occur at the higher elevations.

4. MANAGEABILITY

The area outside the mineralized zones can be managed as wilderness to preserve values now present. This area is a block of public land with no private inholdings or state lands. Areas within mineralized zones cannot be managed as wilderness as they will lose wilderness values over the long term due to mining activities. It is anticipated that a large portion of the mineralized area will be developed into an open-pit mine, thereby forgoing any opportunity to manage wilderness values.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

According to a USGS report, Carlin-type disseminated gold deposits are found in the WSA. The report identifies 2,000 acres as having identified gold resources, 3,600 acres as having high potential for gold resources, and 3,900 acres as having moderate potential for gold resources. Drill core sample assays support the report. As of October 1989, there were approximately 425 post-FLPMA mining claims.

Identified limestone resources and high potential for high-purity limestone occur along the western and eastern boundaries of the survey area. Moderate potential for phosphate occurs in the north-central portion of the WSA. The area has low potential oil and gas resources.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC PUBLIC COMMENTS

The BLM received 42 comments on the draft EIS; four supported more wilderness than proposed, seven supported the proposed action, 25 supported less wilderness than proposed, and six had no position. Comments specific to the Bluebell WSA addressed alternatives for adding and deleting portions and the WSA's mineral potential.

County agencies or officials submitted no comments. The Governor of Nevada's consistency review supported the BLM's original proposed action for a partial wilderness recommendation except an area on the WSA's west side with good potential for metallic minerals.

The EPA requested clarification in the final EIS on interim management, off-road vehicle use affecting potential wilderness status, access for mineral exploration or development, and the use of USGS/BOM surveys to modify the wilderness recommendation. The U.S. Air Force supported alternatives that would not restrict military overflights.

The BLM received one comment on the final Wells Wilderness EIS; the EPA supported the proposed action.