

WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS REVIEW

Date of Submission: December 15, 2001

Proponent: Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA); Utah Wilderness Coalition (UWC)

Name of Area to be Reviewed: **Bitter Creek Area**

Date(s) of Field Office Review: February 7, 2007

BLM Field Office(s) Affected: Vernal Field Office

EVALUATION

1. Was new information submitted by a member of the public for this area?

a. YES: _____ NO: X

2. If new information was submitted, describe the submission. For example, did the submission include a map that identifies the specific boundaries of the area(s) in question; a narrative that describes the wilderness characteristics of the area and documents how that information differs from the information gathered and reviewed previously in the BLM inventories; photographic documentation; etc?

a. No new information has been submitted by a member of the public.

In 1979, the BLM Vernal Field Office completed the BLM *McCook Ridge Wilderness Inventory Situation Evaluation Report (UT-080-723)*. McCook Ridge was recommended for intensive wilderness inventory. The recommendation was approved February 21, 1979. The recommendation for Atchee Ridge in the BLM *Atchee Ridge Wilderness Inventory Situation Evaluation Report (UT-080-720)* was that the area did not qualify for further inventory. The recommendation was approved on February 12, 1979.

In 1999, the BLM reinventoried the Cripple Cowboy portion of the *McCook Ridge Wilderness Inventory Situation Evaluation Report (UT-080-723)* and determined that the area did contain wilderness characteristics. This determination is described as the BLM Cripple Cowboy Wilderness Inventory Area in the *1999 Utah Wilderness Inventory (revised 2003)*. The Cripple Cowboy area was reviewed separately in February 2007 by a Vernal Field Office interdisciplinary team. A separate report was prepared and the area excluded from this report.

The proponents submitted information for the *SUWA/UWC Bitter Creek Proposed Wilderness Unit* to the BLM Vernal Field Office on December 15, 2001. The submitted information included more detailed data than the BLM considered during the 1979 initial inventories concerning opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation, supplemental wilderness values, natural character, and photos. The UWC Bitter Creek area was divided into two separate proposals: 1) Bitter Creek – includes the BLM *McCook Ridge Wilderness Inventory Situation Evaluation Report (UT-080-723)* and the BLM *Atchee Ridge Wilderness Inventory Situation Evaluation Report (UT-080-720)*; and, 2) Bitter Creek/Rat Hole Ridge which includes the BLM *Rat Hole Ridge Wilderness Inventory Situation Evaluation Report (UT-080-722)*.

The BLM Vernal Field Office in April and May 2002 prepared *Evaluation of New Information Reports* reviewing prior information. The evaluations concurred that the *SUWA/UWC Bitter Creek Proposed Wilderness Unit* may contain wilderness characteristics.

On February 7, 2007, a Vernal Field Office interdisciplinary team reviewed the *McCook Ridge Wilderness Inventory Situation Evaluation Report (UT-080-723)*; the *BLM Atchee Ridge Wilderness Inventory Situation Evaluation Report (UT-080-720)*; the Cripple Cowboy Wilderness Inventory Area in the *1999 Utah Wilderness Inventory (revised 2003)*; the SUWA/UWC Bitter Creek submittal; and, the two Vernal Field Office 2002 *Evaluation of New Information Reports*. In addition, the interdisciplinary team reviewed changes to the area since 2002 that could affect the presence or absence of wilderness characteristics

This maintenance review did not include U.S. National Forest lands, U.S. National Park Service, State of Utah lands, or private lands. Only lands within the BLM Vernal Field Office planning boundaries were considered by the interdisciplinary team. The attached map shows the BLM Vernal Field Office's determination of which lands contain or do not contain wilderness characteristics for the review area.

3. As a result of interdisciplinary review of relevant information (which may include aerial photographs, state and county road information, road maintenance agreements, prior documentation from the BLM inventories, field observations, maps, master title plats, evidence presented as new information by a proponent, etc.), do you conclude:
- a. _____ The decision reached previously in the BLM inventories that the area lacks wilderness is still valid.
- (or)
- b. X Some or all of the area has wilderness characteristics as shown on the attached map.
4. Describe your findings regarding specific wilderness characteristics and provide detailed rationale.
- a. **WIA Area:**
- (1). **Description:** No WIA was delineated.
- b. **Externally Nominated Area.**
- (1). **Description:** The Bitter Creek review area is located in southeastern Uintah County about 50 air miles Southeast of Vernal, Utah, and extends into Colorado. Only lands within the administrative boundaries of the Vernal Field Office were reviewed by the interdisciplinary team. The terrain is typical of the Book Cliffs, consisting of alternating ridges and deep, steep-walled canyons. Elevations range from 6,000 feet along canyon bottoms to 8,000 feet on the ridge lines. The major drainage for the area is the Bitter Creek, which generally trends from the Southeast to the Northwest. Numerous side canyons branch off of Bitter Creek.
- Vegetation in the review area is diverse with riparian species located on the canyon bottoms; piñon, juniper, and Douglas fir found on the canyon slopes; and, sagebrush, piñon, and juniper woodlands on the ridges.

About 23,762 acres or 56% of the Bitter Creek review area are covered by existing oil and gas leases.

The area is divided into three parcels. Parcel #1 is located on the northwest side of the area in Sections 4-10 and 15-18, T13S, R24E. The parcel is separated from Parcels #2 and #3 by Brewer Canyon road, private lands, and State of Utah Division of Wildlife Resources wildlife reserve area. The parcel is less than 5,000 acres in size.

Parcel #2 is located south of Parcel #1 and west of Parcel #3 in Sections 24 and 25, T13S, R23E; Sections 18-21, 28-31, and 33, T13S, R24E; and, Section 4, T14S, R24E. Visible oil and gas seismic lines, an increase in the number and extent of OHV routes, and additional camping areas have diminished the appearance of naturalness. The parcel is less than 5,000 acres in size.

Parcel #3 is comprised of most of the lands within the review area. The parcel is southeast of Parcels #1 and #2 in T13S, R24-25E, and T14S, R24-26E. Several roads and two-tracks can be observed on the canyon bottoms of the parcel.

- (2). **Appearance of Naturalness:** The large size of area and the alternating ridges and deep, steep-walled canyons diminishes the impact from several human-made disturbances that exist in the area. The disturbances include: cattle and wildlife enclosures, fences, motorized routes, and oil and gas seismic surveys.

The impact of these disturbances on Parcel #1 is relatively minor and unnoticeable. However, the parcel is separated from the other two parcels and is less than 5,000 acres in size.

Parcel #2 contains several, readily visible disturbances that diminish the appearance of naturalness. These include oil and gas seismic lines, an increased number of OHV routes, and other motorized travel routes.

The large size of Parcel #3 minimizes the impact of disturbances to the natural character of the parcel. The disturbances are hidden by the terrain and are substantially unnoticeable in the parcel as a whole. Most of the accessible ridges or canyons have travel routes along them. Those routes that are noticeable such as the route on Indian Spring Ridge have been cherry-stemmed out of the parcel. Hunting, antler collecting and wood cutting are significant seasonal uses within the parcel.

On Indian Spring Ridge, a hazardous fuel reduction treatment totaling 500 acres was performed in 2006 with a Bull-Hog mechanical mulcher. This treatment was a follow-up to a partially successful prescribed burn in 2004, Sec. 31 T15S, R25E. The remains of the woody vegetation are compost-like piles usually less than 1 foot in height. The interdisciplinary team determined that the vegetative remains were scattered, diffuse, and isolated enough that the average observer would not notice this disturbance as a substantial impact to naturalness.

In the late 1960's, a chaining project occurred on Boulevard Ridge. Over time, the area has reverted to open, grassy clearings. The clearings are still interrupted by random upturned pinion stumps. An average observer would not notice this disturbance as a substantial impact to naturalness.

- (3). **Solitude, and Primitive and Unconfined Recreation:** The rugged topography of the area extends from steep-sided canyons to ridgelines. The numerous deep canyons and ridges with woody vegetation in Parcel #3 provide a screening effect for visitors and the opportunity for solitude. Large portions of the parcel are not accessible by motorized vehicles thereby affording visitors with the opportunity for primitive and unconfined recreation.
- (4). **Supplemental Values:** The review area with its deep canyons, high ridges, and sheer cliffs offers many scenic and wildlife viewing opportunities. The vegetation is diverse which adds to the area's scenic qualities. Deer and elk are common in the area. Bears have also been sighted. The streams and adjacent cliffs provide habitat for a variety of birds, including peregrine falcons and golden eagles.
- (5). **Areas without wilderness characteristics:** Parcel #1 while having an appearance of naturalness and some opportunities of solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation is less than 5,000 acres in size and is separated from the large Parcel #3 by the Brewer Canyon road and State of Utah Division of Wildlife Resources wildlife reserve area. A determination has been made that the parcel does not contain wilderness characteristics due to its size.

Parcel #2 contains visible oil and gas seismic lines, an increase in the number and extent of naturalness. Also, the parcel is less than 5,000 acres in size. A determination has been made that the parcel does not contain wilderness characteristics due to the lack of the appearance of naturalness and to its size. OHV routes, and additional camping areas that have diminished the appearance of

- c. As protocol for all VFO wilderness characteristic reviews, the Interdisciplinary Team determined appropriate set-back distances for pipelines, roads, and other R-O-Ws.
- d. The following table summarizes the Non-WSA lands in the review area that do or do not contain wilderness characteristics:

BITTER CREEK AREA			
Type of Lands	Non WSA Lands with wilderness characteristics (acres)	Non WSA Lands without wilderness characteristics (acres)	Total Acres
UWC, Externally Nominated	33,488	8,816	42,304
WIA, BLM Identified	0	0	0
TOTAL ACRES	33,488	8,816	42,304

5. Document all information considered during the interdisciplinary team review (e.g. aerial photographs, state and county road information, road maintenance agreements, prior documentation from the BLM inventories, field observations, maps, master title plats, evidence presented as new information by a proponent, etc.)
- August 2006 NAIP (National Agricultural Imagery Program) aerial photos.
 - Master Title Plats.
 - State of Utah DOGM (Division of Oil, Gas and Mining) approved, producing and plugged and abandoned oil and gas wells (current up to 1-25-07).
 - R-O-W using LR 2000.
 - Field Observations.
 - GIS layers for various resources including: Range improvements, Recreation facilities, Wildlife, and Fire including both Rx and fuels projects.
 - USGS digital topographic maps both 1:24,000 and 1:100,000.
 - Land status of the BLM.
 - The BLM road layer including roads on 1:24,000 scale and supplemented by both GPS and aerial photography.
 - Uintah County Roads layer August 2006.
 - UWC wilderness proposal data layer.
6. List the members of the interdisciplinary team and resource specialties represented.

<i>Chuck Patterson</i>	<i>Recreation</i>
<i>Kim Bartel</i>	<i>Recreation/wilderness</i>
<i>Tim Faircloth</i>	<i>Wildlife</i>
<i>Naomi Hatch</i>	<i>Realty</i>
<i>Jerry Kenczka</i>	<i>AFM Minerals</i>
<i>Howard Cleavinger</i>	<i>Associate Field Manager</i>
<i>Kyle Smith</i>	<i>GIS</i>
<i>Steve Knox</i>	<i>USO Planning Specialist</i>
<i>Kelly Buckner</i>	<i>NEPA</i>
<i>Mark Stavropoulos</i>	<i>Range</i>
<i>Blaine Phillips</i>	<i>Archeology</i>