

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: **Desolation Canyon 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 in prior BLM inventories; photographic documentation; etc?

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

The proponent submitted a map identifying the specific boundaries of the UWC *Desbrough Canyon and Desolation Canyon Proposed Wilderness Unit* as proposed in the bill, *America's Red Rock Wilderness Act*. For the purpose of this review, the UWC *Desbrough Canyon and Desolation Canyon Proposed Wilderness Unit* as illustrated in the *UWC Proposal for Wilderness in Utah* will be called the Desolation Canyon review area. The *America's Red Rock Wilderness Act* bill was first introduced in 1989. It recently was reintroduced into the 110th Congress as H.R.1919 in the U.S. House of Representatives, and S. 1170 in the U.S. Senate.

In 1980, the BLM issued a decision on Wilderness Study Areas based on the 1979 Wilderness Intensive Inventory Evaluation Reports. Much of the Desolation Canyon review area is contained within the following areas: Devils Canyon (UT-080-616), Nine Mile Canyon (UT-080-612), and Sand Wash (UT080-065).

In 1999, the BLM reinventoried the Desolation Canyon area and determined that the area did contain wilderness characteristics. This determination is described as the BLM Desolation Canyon Wilderness Inventory Area in the *1999 Utah Wilderness Inventory (revised 2003)*.

The proponents submitted information to the BLM Vernal Field Office on December 15, 2001. The submitted information included more detailed data than the BLM considered during the *1979 Wilderness Intensive Inventory Evaluation Reports* concerning opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation, supplemental wilderness values, natural character, and photos. The boundaries of the proposal encompassed the BLM Desolation Canyon Inventory Area (WIA) and included additional lands beyond the WIA.

The Vernal Field Office in November 2002 prepared an *Evaluation of New Information Report* that indicated portions of the Desolation Canyon review area outside of the WIA may contain wilderness characteristics.

On February 7, 2007, a Vernal Field Office interdisciplinary team reviewed the pertinent *1979 Wilderness Intensive Inventory Evaluation Report*; the UWC *Desbrough Canyon Proposed Wilderness Unit* as proposed in the bill, *America's Red Rock Wilderness Act*; the book *Wilderness at the Edge*; the 1999 *BLM Desolation Canyon Wilderness Inventory Area*; and, the three 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

The Vernal Field Office in November 2002 prepared an *Evaluation of New Information Report* that determined wilderness characteristics may be present in the Desolation Canyon review area.

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, documentation from prior BLM inventories, field observations, maps, master title plats, evidence presented as new information by a proponent, etc.), do you conclude:

a. The decision reached in previous BLM inventories that the area lacks wilderness is still valid.

(or)

b. 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:** The Desolation Canyon review area is located in Duchesne and Uintah Counties about 40 air miles south-southwest of Vernal, Utah. The WIA area was identified in the *1999 Utah Wilderness Inventory (revised 2003)*. The unit of interest is Unit #1 within Duchesne and Uintah Counties. The Naval Oil Shale Reserve on the east side of the Green River and on the south end of Unit #1 has been transferred to the Ute Tribe and is no longer administered by the BLM. The UWC proposal encompasses the WIA area.

The terrain found within the WIA varies dramatically from the Green River bottoms and floodplains to the high ridges of the Tavaputs Plateau nearly 9,500 feet in elevation. Numerous mesas, ridges, plateaus, canyons, and remote drainages intersect with the Green River.

The review area contains a variety of vegetation ranging from the riparian zones along the river, piñon- juniper woodlands, and areas with saltbush, sagebrush, and shadscale. The higher ridges may have stands of aspen, spruce, and fir.

The WIA area has about 37,157 acres or 64% of the area currently leased for oil and gas. For that part of the area considered to have wilderness characteristics, seven wells have a listed status of Plugged and Abandoned, and seven Applications for Permit to Drill (APDs) have been approved by the State of Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining (UDOGM). The BLM has not finalized the processing of these APDs. The State of Utah lands in the area also are leased.

The Little Desert Road in the west portion of the area is the line of demarcation between the UWC nominated to the west of the road and the BLM inventoried lands to the east of the road. Two producing wells located off the Little Desert Road as well as the road, have been cherry-stemmed.

- (2). **Appearance of Naturalness:** The area is natural in condition. While there are human-made developments, except as provided below, they are scattered and their individual and cumulative impact on the natural character of the area is minor. The imprints are in various stages of natural rehabilitation and substantially unnoticeable as a whole. The expansive landscape, diverse topography, and vegetation screen intrusions from sight within the area.

New impacts to the Desolation Canyon review area have occurred since 1999. The Vernal Field Office interdisciplinary team has identified several areas that now do not have the appearance of naturalness due to existing impacts from oil and gas activities that were conducted under valid, existing rights. These areas that are lacking in naturalness isolate other small portions of land within the review area.

Since 1999, Dominion Oil and Gas has drilled extensively east of the Green River adjacent to the eastern boundary of the review area. The area is adjacent to the River Bend Unit. This particular area has a travel route identified on the attached map as the Kings Canyon Road. The road is the primary north/south route servicing the Dominion operations. The interdisciplinary team found that enough development has occurred east of Kings Canyon Road that the lands do not have an appearance of naturalness. Those lands that were considered not to contain wilderness characteristics are described under Heading 4.b.(5), Areas without wilderness characteristics.

An area located in Sections 13, 14, 22-24, T10S, R18E; and, Section 19, T10S, R19E, is isolated by existing motorized routes from the portion of the WIA that has an appearance of naturalness. The area is substantially less than 5,000 acres in size and is not considered to have an appearance of naturalness due to its size.

Along the western edge of the WIA, two producing wells located off the Little Desert Road as well as the road, have been cherry-stemmed.

- (3). **Solitude, Primitive and Unconfined Recreation:** The Desolation Canyon review area is contiguous to the Desolation Canyon WSA. The WIA area is large enough to provide opportunities for solitude on its own as a large, remote area where visitors are isolated from the outside world. The vast size, configuration, numerous scenic vistas, and diversity of vegetation and landform provide the visitor with numerous places to be alone while providing opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation. Most of review area is remote, accessible only by foot, horseback, or boat.

Areas of the WIA that are not considered to be natural in appearance are identified under Heading 4.a.(1)., Appearance of Naturalness, and Heading 4.a.(5)., Areas without wilderness characteristics.

- (4). **Supplemental Values:** The Desolation Canyon review area contains many supplemental wilderness values, including cultural, scenic, geologic, botanical, and wildlife values. Habitats within the area range from desert canyons to high mountain environments. Six endangered animals occur or may occur in the review area. Ten special status animals and six special status plants may also live here.
- (5). **Areas without wilderness characteristics:** The interdisciplinary team found that a substantial amount of development has occurred east of Kings Canyon Road. These lands have diminished in naturalness and do not have the appearance of naturalness. It has been determined that the lands east of Kings Canyon Road do not contain wilderness characteristics.

The area located in Sections 13, 14, 22-24, T10S, R18E; and, Section 19, T10S, R19E, is isolated by existing motorized routes from lands that contain wilderness characteristics. The area is substantially less than 5,000 acres in size. The interdisciplinary team found that this area does not contain wilderness characteristics due to its isolation from other lands the small size of the area..

b. Externally Nominated Area:

- (1). **Description:** The UWC nominated areas contain similar terrain and vegetation as described for the WIA area under Heading 4.a.(1)., Description.

The nominated area is found to the northwest of the Little Desert Road and is located in Sections 24-28, 33-35, T10S, R17E; Sections 1-5, T11S, R17E; Sections 19-21, 28-31, T11S, R18E. Two producing wells located off the Little Desert Road as well as the road, have been cherry-stemmed.

The interdisciplinary team identified four, small areas located in Sections 27, 34, T10S, R19E; and, Section 11, T11S, R19E, as containing wilderness characteristics. The areas are east of the Kings Canyon Road and, the WIA lands found by the interdisciplinary team to not have wilderness characteristics. The areas have not been previously reviewed.

The additional area nominated by UWC has about 10,961 acres or 94% of the area currently leased for oil and gas. For that part of the area considered to have wilderness characteristics, one well has a listed status of Plugged and Abandoned; one well as a listed status of producing; one well has a listed status of drilling; and, three Applications for Permit to Drill (APDs) have been approved by the State of Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining (UDOGM). The BLM has not finalized the processing of these APDs. The State of Utah lands in the area also are leased.

- (2). **Appearance of Naturalness:** The externally nominated lands northwest of the Little Desert Road are similar to the lands described under Heading 4.a.(2)., Appearance of Naturalness, in that the lands have retained the appearance of naturalness.