

WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS REVIEW

Date of Submission: December 15, 2001; September 3, 2002

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

Name of Area to be Reviewed: **Dragon 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 previously gathered and reviewed 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 initial wilderness inventories on Atchee Ridge and Davis Canyon units. The report recommended that Atchee Ridge be dropped from further consideration and that Davis Canyon be recommended for further study. The Davis Canyon unit underwent a name change to Atchee Ridge. The BLM conducted an intensive inventory in 1980.

The Dragon Canyon review area was not reinventoried in 1999.

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 initial inventories concerning opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation, supplemental wilderness values, natural character, and photos. The boundaries of the proposal encompassed the original 1979 Atchee Ridge and Davis Canyon initial inventories in Utah and the Colorado Unit 50. The Vernal Field Office in April 2002 prepared an *Evaluation of New Information* report that indicated the decisions reached in the 1979 initial inventories and the 1980 intensive inventory remained valid and that the area does not contain wilderness characteristics. On September 3, 2002, SUWA submitted new and supplemental information for the BLM Vernal Field Office to reconsider the April 2002 *Evaluation of New Information*. The office reviewed this submission and prepared an *Evaluation of New Information* dated October 7, 2002. The report concurred with the office's previous determination.

On February 7, 2007, a Vernal Field Office interdisciplinary team reviewed the 1979 Atchee Ridge and Davis Canyon initial inventory reports; the 1980 Atchee Ridge intensive inventory report; the two SUWA/UWC submittals; 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 State of Utah lands or private lands. 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 previously reached in the 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:** No WIA area is present.

b. **Externally Nominated Area:**

(1). **Description:** The Dragon Canyon review area is located in Uintah County along the Utah-Colorado border about 66 air miles southeast of Vernal, Utah. The terrain in the area is comprised of several deep, steep-walled canyons that trend in a northerly direction. The ridgelines between the canyons may be up to 1/2 mile wide. The major access routes to the area are along these ridges which also form most of the review area boundaries. The surface, overall, is sloping away from the southern physiographic rim of the Uinta Basin. Some higher elevation viewpoints are present.

In the canyons and along the ridgelines are piñon-juniper woodlands with and undergrowth of low shrubs and grasses.

About 15,968 acres or 80% of the area is covered by existing oil and gas leases.

(2). **Appearance of Naturalness:** The routes impacting the naturalness of the area in the 1979 inventories were found by the BLM in 2002 to have usage increase and still are impacting naturalness.

In 2001, a prescribed burn up to 400 acres was conducted. The burn would not be noticeable to the casual visitor other than as a natural occurrence.

Since 2002, two coal bed natural gas wells were completed in Atchee Canyon. Additional coal bed natural gas activity is present in Colorado.

In 2007, the interdisciplinary team agrees that the roads and trails of interest in the area continue to see increased use from recreationists, hunters, and firewood cutters. Additional ATV use is occurring near existing roads throughout the review area. The impacts are substantially noticeable, and the appearance of naturalness in the area has been diminished.

A small portion of the review area in Section 25, T12S, R25E, is isolated from the area due to an existing road, private land, and State of Utah land. The portion is substantially smaller than 5,000 acres in size. Impacts to this portion of the review are similar to those described.

The BLM Colorado determined that the appearance of naturalness has been diminished due to increased off-road usage by hunters, recreationists, and firewood cutters. Additional oil and gas wells and access roads have been constructed in the Colorado area.

- (3). **Solitude, Primitive and Unconfined Recreation:** The vegetation and deep canyons would provide limited screening to possibly allow some opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation. Visitors to the area may take advantage of hiking, camping, and photography.
- (4). **Supplemental Values:** The area's geologic and topographic features provide scenic views for the visitor. Habitats for mule deer, elk, black bear, and mountain lion are present in the area. Habitats for sensitive plant and animal species are present.
- (5). **Areas without wilderness characteristics:** The interdisciplinary team determined that the human-made disturbances identified under Heading 4.b.(2)., are substantially noticeable and the area does not contain wilderness characteristics. This determination is the same as that reached in previous decisions by the BLM.

In addition, the small portion of the review area less than 5,000 acres in size located in Section 25, T12S, R25E, is isolated from any other area containing wilderness characteristics in Utah or Colorado. This portion of the nominated lands was determined by the interdisciplinary team to not contain wilderness characteristics.

- 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:

DRAGON CANYON AREA			
Type of Lands	Non WSA Lands With Wilderness Characteristics (acres)	Non WSA Lands Without Wilderness Characteristics (acres)	Total Acres
UWC, Externally Nominated	0	19,899	19,899
WIA, BLM Identified	0	0	0
TOTAL ACRES	0	19,899	19,899

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 Division of Oil, Gas and Mining (UDOGM) 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>
<i>Steve Strong</i>	<i>Fire</i>
<i>Stephanie Howard</i>	<i>NEPA</i>

7. Signature / Concurrence

This review by a Vernal Field Office interdisciplinary team was conducted in February 2007. The purpose of the review was to identify for planning purposes those areas that are not Wilderness Study Areas (WSA) but do contain wilderness characteristics. A supplement to the draft Vernal Land Use Plan will, in Alternative E, analyze the impact from and to the identified wilderness characteristics. Until the Land Use Plan is completed, it should be noted that as part of a project-specific or site-specific analysis within this area, these findings will be used to assess impacts, if any, to wilderness characteristics within the project area.

I concur with the findings of the interdisciplinary team as described in this review.

Name: William Hauge
Field Office Manager

Date: 6/6/07

This determination is part of an interim step in the BLM's internal decision-making process and does not constitute a decision that can be appealed.