

# WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS REVIEW

Date of Submission: January 30, 2007

Proponent: Utah Wilderness Coalition (UWC) – (America's Red Rock Wilderness Proposal)

Name of Area to be Reviewed: **Split Mountain Benches Area**

Date(s) of Field Office Review: February 6, 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:   X   NO:       

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. The proponent submitted a map identifying the specific boundaries of the UWC *Split Mountain Benches Proposed Wilderness Unit* as proposed in the bill, *America's Red Rock Wilderness Act*. This bill was first introduced in 1989. The *America's Red Rock Wilderness Act* bill was reintroduced into the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress as H.R.1919 in the U.S. House of Representatives, and S. 1170 in the U.S. Senate.

In 1989, UWC published the book *Wilderness at the Edge*, which provided information on the Split Mountain Benches.

On February 6, 2007, a Vernal Field Office interdisciplinary team reviewed UWC *Split Mountain Benches Proposed Wilderness Unit* as proposed in the bill, *America's Red Rock Wilderness Act*; and, the published book *Wilderness at the Edge*. 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, 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.   X   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 Split Mountain Benches review area is located in Uintah County about 10 miles east of Vernal, Utah. The area is about one mile wide and three miles long. The Dinosaur National Monument, State of Utah lands, and private lands form the eastern boundary. To the north, west, and south, the area is bounded by the Bean Draw Road, existing two-tracks, and a buried pipeline corridor. The lower slopes of Split Mountain comprise most of the area. The slopes dip westward at more than five degrees. Intervening drainages occur about every quarter mile. Near the northwestern boundary the area is relatively flat.

Vegetation consists of dense, 10-foot tall juniper woodlands on the upper slopes. The lower slopes and flats are occupied by Wyoming sage, rubber rabbit-brush, and perennials such as Indian rice grass, needle and thread as well as annual grasses such as cheat grass.

About 1,969 acres of the review area has been leased for oil and gas exploration and production. This represents 91% of the area. No producing or plugged and abandoned wells are present in the area.

(2). **Appearance of Naturalness:** Within the area, a significant increase in ATV usage has occurred over the last five years. Previously, travel routes were used by grazing permittees to reach water improvements. The primary access route for ATV's into the area is Bean Draw Road. New routes have been created for the purposes of camping, antler collecting, exploring, and big game hunting. Most of these intrusive routes are through sandy soils. Some large (>1 acre) non-designated camping sites are adjacent to these ATV routes. The surface vegetation has been denuded in many cases and many trees have limbs broken or cut off for camp fires and to enhance ATV access. Several openings have been cut into the Dinosaur National Monument and range allotment fences along the eastern boundary of the area for access into the monument. Weeds including White Top have been chemically treated by both back-pack and ATV boom.

The increased ATV usage has diminished the naturalness in the review area.

- (3). **Solitude, Primitive and Unconfined Recreation:** The accessibility of the area and its year-round use by ATVs has limited opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation. Only near the eastern boundary within some of the small drainages could a visitor find possible opportunities for both solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation due to the terrain and vegetative screening. The intervening slopes have diminished opportunities.
- (4). **Supplemental Values:** Hiking or horseback riding could provide a visitor solitude during periods that ATVs are not present.
- (5). **Areas without wilderness characteristics:** The Vernal Field Office interdisciplinary team reviewed the Split Mountain Benches area on February 6, 2007. The team determined that the area does not contain wilderness characteristics due to the substantially noticeable increase in ATV usage and group camping in the area that has diminished the appearance of naturalness.
- b. As protocol for all VFO wilderness characteristic reviews, the Interdisciplinary Team determined appropriate set-back distances for pipelines, roads, and other R-O-Ws.
- c. The following table summarizes the Non-WSA lands in the review area that do or do not contain wilderness characteristics:

<b>SPLIT MOUNTAIN BENCHES AREA</b>			
<b>Type of Lands</b>	<b>Non WSA Lands with wilderness characteristics (acres)</b>	<b>Non WSA Lands without wilderness characteristics (acres)</b>	<b>Total Acres</b>
UWC, Externally Nominated	0	2,164	2,164
WIA, BLM Identified	0	0	0
<b>TOTAL ACRES</b>	0	2,164	2,164

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>

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 Hunsy*  
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.