

WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS REVIEW

Date of Submission: December 15, 2001

Proponent: Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance / Utah Wilderness Coalition

Name of Area to be Reviewed: **Lower 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 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 the *Bitter Creek Wilderness Inventory Situation Evaluation Report (UT-080-715)* and recommended the area for intensive wilderness inventory. The recommendation was approved on February 21, 1979. The *Bitter Creek Wilderness Intensive Inventory Report (UT-080-715)* recommended that the area did not qualify for wilderness study. On March 20, 1980, this recommendation was approved. The SUWA/UWC submittal is included in the BLM 1979 Bitter Creek Inventory Unit.

The Lower Bitter Creek review area was not reinventoried for inclusion in the *1999 Utah Wilderness Inventory (revised 2003)*.

The proponent submitted new information concerning the *SUWA/UWC Lower Bitter Creek Proposed Wilderness Unit* to the BLM Vernal Field Office on December 15, 2001. Their submitted information included more detailed data than the BLM considered during the 1980 Bitter Creek intensive inventory concerning opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation, supplemental wilderness values, natural character, and photos. No other information has been received since that submission.

In April and May 2002, the BLM Vernal Field Office reviewed this submittal and prepared two *Evaluation of New Information Reports*. A determination was made on dated May 23, 2002, that portions of the review area may contain wilderness characteristics.

On February 7, 2007, a field office interdisciplinary team reviewed the 1979 *Bitter Creek Wilderness Inventory Situation Evaluation Report (UT-080-715)* and the 1980 *Bitter Creek Wilderness Intensive Inventory Report (UT-080-715)*; the *SUWA/UWC Lower Bitter Creek Proposed Wilderness Unit*; and, both of the BLM prepared 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. 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 Area is present.

b. **Externally Nominated Area.**

(1). **Description:** The Lower Bitter Creek review area is located in Uintah County about 35 air miles south of Vernal, Utah. There are 14,099 acres in the review area. Additional lands owned by the State of Utah were nominated by the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA) and the Utah Wilderness Coalition (UWC). The BLM Vernal Field Office interdisciplinary team did not review these lands for wilderness characteristics.

The surface of the review area may be described as having a rolling terrain that is quite dissected by shallow to moderately deep washes that drain into Bitter Creek. Bitter Creek is the main drainage in the area and bisects the review area trending southeast to northwest. Three prominent buttes with a relief of 500 feet are visible in the area.

Vegetation in the review area ranges from the riparian habitat along Bitter Creek; grasses and shrubs along the draws; desert shrubs and grasses on the rolling terrain; and, at higher elevations, piñon-juniper woodlands are present.

About 10,713 acres or 76% of the area is covered by existing oil and gas leases.

- (2). **Appearance of Naturalness:** In February 2007, a Vernal Field Office interdisciplinary team review of the Lower Bitter Creek area concurred with the *Evaluation of New Information Report* dated May 23, 2002.

A north-south trending road in Sections 4 and 9 of T13S, R23E, connects the Bitter Creek Road on the review area's northern boundary with State of Utah owned lands in Section 16. The road is considered noticeable and with the State of Utah owned land segregates this portion from the rest of the area. East of this road several human-made intrusions are present; are noticeable; and, have diminished the natural character of the land. This part of the area is less than 5,000 acres in size.

The main, western portion of the area is of sufficient size and has retained an appearance of naturalness due to the dissected, rolling terrain and vegetation. The human-made intrusions in this area are substantially unnoticeable and are screened by the terrain and vegetation.

A juniper removal project is scheduled for 2007. The number of trees to be cut will depend on the density but will range from four per acre to as many 20/acre. The project will not diminish naturalness to the casual observer.

The Second Nature Wilderness Program uses the area for some of their activities. It is possible to see tarp shelters/tents when they are in the area. The terrain and vegetation will screen these activities to the casual observer and not diminish the natural character.

- (3). **Solitude, Primitive and Unconfined Recreation:** Opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation exist in the main, western portion of the review area. The terrain, vegetation, and size of this portion of the review area will provide isolation to the visitor.
Opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation in the eastern portion of the review area are limited due to the lack of an appearance of naturalness as described under Heading 4.b.(2)., Appearance of Naturalness.

- (4). **Supplemental Values:** The Bitter Creek drainage and the surrounding area provide habitat for a variety of sensitive plant and animal species. The prominent buttes provide scenic views.

- (5). **Areas without wilderness characteristics:** In February 2007, a Vernal Field Office interdisciplinary team review of the Lower Bitter Creek area concurred with the *Evaluation of New Information* dated May 5, 2002.

The north-south trending road in Sections 4 and 9 of T13S, R23E, is noticeable and provides a boundary separating those lands to the east from the main, western portion of the review area which was determined to contain wilderness characteristics.

The interdisciplinary team determined that this eastern portion of the area does not contain wilderness characteristics due to human-made intrusions described under Heading 4.b.(2), and the fact that the area is less than 5,000 acres in size.

- 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:

LOWER 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	11,417	2,682	14,099
WIA, BLM Identified	0	0	0
TOTAL ACRES	11,417	2,682	14,099

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 Stunz Date: 6/6/07
Field Office Manager

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.