

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: **Sweet Water 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 the BLM *Sweetwater Canyon Wilderness Inventory Situation Evaluation Report (UT-080-725)*. The Sweet Water Canyon review area is encompassed by the 1979 evaluation report. It was recommended that the area did not qualify for further wilderness inventory. The recommendation was approved February 21, 1979.

The Sweet Water Canyon review area was not reinventoried for inclusion in the *1999 Utah Wilderness Inventory (revised 2003)*.

The proponents submitted information for the *SUWA/UWC Sweet Water Canyon 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 inventory concerning opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation, supplemental wilderness values, natural character, and photos. The boundaries of the proposal are similar to the 1979 *Sweet Water Canyon Wilderness Inventory Situation Evaluation Report (UT-080-725)*.

The BLM Vernal Field Office in April and May 2002 prepared *Evaluation of New Information Reports* reviewing prior information. The evaluations determined that at least portions of the Sweet Water Canyon review area may contain wilderness characteristics.

On February 7, 2007, a Vernal Field Office interdisciplinary team reviewed the 1979 *Sweetwater Canyon Wilderness Inventory Situation Evaluation Report (UT-080-725)*; the December 2001 *SUWA/UWC Sweet Water Canyon Proposed Wilderness Unit*; and, the Vernal Field Office *Evaluation of New Information Reports* of April and May 2002. In addition, the interdisciplinary team reviewed changes to the area since 2002 that could affect the presence or absence of wilderness characteristics. The interdisciplinary team concurred that wilderness characteristics are present.

This maintenance review does 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 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 Sweet Water Canyon review area is located about 70 air miles southeast of Vernal, Utah, in Uintah and Grand Counties. Most of the area is in Uintah County and all of the review area is within the planning boundaries of the Vernal Field Office. The terrain of the area is typical of the Book Cliffs. It consists of deep canyons and elongated ridges. Elevations range from 7,000 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 such as Dry Canyon and Railroad Canyon branch off of Bitter Creek.

Canyon bottom vegetation consists of riparian species along the waterways. There are some wet meadows in the Sweet Water Canyon bottoms. Bench areas contain sagebrush, rabbit-brush, grasses, and greasewood. Above an elevation of 7,400 feet, canyon walls are dominated by Douglas fir, piñon and juniper woodlands, and quaking aspen. The Douglas fir is mainly found on north-facing slopes. Ridge top vegetation consists primarily of sagebrush and piñon and juniper woodlands.

About 5,143 acres or 74% of the Sweet Water review area is currently leased for oil and gas exploration and development.

All disturbances identified in the BLM's 1979 Wilderness Inventory that are still noticeable were excluded from the externally nominated area.

- (2). **Appearance of Naturalness:** The alternating ridges and deep, steep-walled canyons diminish the impact from several human-made disturbances that exist in the area. The disturbances include: cattle and wildlife exclosures, stock ponds, fences, motorized routes, and oil and gas seismic surveys. The disturbances are scattered throughout the area and are screened by the topographic relief and vegetation. The disturbances are substantially unnoticeable.

Since 1979, a large reservoir was constructed in Railroad Canyon. This is on the boundary of the review area. A gas well was drilled and plugged and abandoned in Railroad Canyon. The location and access road are naturally rehabilitating and are not readily visible.

Recent oil and gas activities have taken place adjacent to the review area but have not taken place within the review area. Cattle grazing is currently the dominate use of the area.

The fence along Tom Patterson Ridge in the review area is substantially unnoticeable. Hunting, antler collecting, and wood cutting are major seasonal uses of the area. Impacts to the area from non-designated camping areas, increased travel on motorized routes, and OHV traffic are substantially unnoticeable. The dirt landing strip or any of the chained lands on Tom Patterson Point are not included in the review area.

The review area is considered to have the appearance of naturalness as described above and to contain wilderness characteristics.

- (3). **Solitude, and Primitive and Unconfined Recreation:** Portions of the review area are isolated and provide opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation. The terrain of deep, steep-walled canyons and the alternating elongated ridges provide physical barriers. Piñon-juniper forests, dense aspen groves, and thick oak and mountain mahogany brush stands provide vegetative screening. Non-motorized recreation activities include horseback riding and hiking.
- (4). **Supplemental Values:** Scenic viewpoints are present along the ridges in the area. Crucial fawning habitat for mule deer and elk is present in the area. Research during the 1990's concluded that the area is home to the largest population of black bear in Utah. Native Americans frequented this area and carved petroglyphs on the cliffs of some of the canyons.
- (5). **Areas without wilderness characteristics:** None.
- 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:

SWEETWATER AREA			
Type of Lands	Non WSA Lands with wilderness characteristics (acres)	Non WSA Lands without wilderness characteristics (acres)	Total Acres
UWC, Externally Nominated	6,994	0	6,994
WIA, BLM Identified	0	0	0
TOTAL ACRES	6,994	0	6,994

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 Co. 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 Hunsper Date: 5/2/07
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.