

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: **Hells Hole Canyon Area**

Date(s) of Field Office Review: February 7, 2007

BLM Field Office(s) Affected: Vernal Field Office; Moab 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 new information for the Hells Hole Canyon review area to the BLM Vernal Field Office on September 15, 2001. The boundaries of the proposal are different than the 1979 intensive wilderness inventory.

The Hells Hole Canyon review area is contained within the Prairie Canyon wilderness inventory unit (UT-060-110). On February 21, 1979, the BLM Moab Field Office completed the Wilderness Inventory Situation Evaluation Report for this unit. The unit was recommended for an intensive wilderness inventory. On August 19, 1979, The Prairie Canyon Unit Wilderness Intensive Inventory Report was approved. The report did not recommend the unit for wilderness study.

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

Several field trips were undertaken during the summer of 2002, by the BLM Meeker, Moab, and Vernal Field Offices. No *Evaluation of New Information* Report was finalized by the BLM Vernal Field Office.

Only that portion of the Hells Hole Canyon review area in the BLM Vernal Field Office planning boundary was reviewed. Other portions of the review area located in Grand County, Utah, was not reviewed by the BLM Vernal Field Office. On February 7, 2007, a Vernal Field Office interdisciplinary team reviewed the 1979 Prairie Canyon initial and intensive inventory reports; the December 2001 SUWA/UWC submittal; and, information from the 2002 field trips. 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, private lands, or lands outside of the BLM Vernal Field Office planning boundary. 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 Hells Hole Canyon review area is located in Uintah and Grand Counties about 90 air miles southeast of Vernal, Utah, along the Utah-Colorado border. Bitter Creek forms the northern boundary of the area; the BLM Vernal Field Office planning boundary is the southern boundary; The border is the eastern boundary; and, the Book Cliffs Divide Road forms the western boundary.

The area is characterized with several deeply incised canyons and ridges ranging in elevation from Bitter Creek around 6,900 to over 8,160 feet along County Line Ridge. Up to 600 feet of topographic relief occurs from the canyon bottoms to the ridge tops. The canyon walls are steep with rock outcroppings.

Vegetation in the canyon bottoms are big sagebrush that gives way to tall oak brush, aspen groves, and small, but densely populated stands of northerly exposed Douglas fir. The ridges are extensively covered by piñon-juniper woodlands.

Wildlife includes mule deer, elk, cougar, black bear, ground squirrel, and many varieties of birds.

About 2,260 acres or 83% of the area is covered by existing oil and gas leases. No plugged and abandoned wells are present.

- (2). **Appearance of Naturalness:** The steep, rugged terrain and dense vegetation have prevented much of the area from use by motorized vehicles. Two designated primitive camps site exists: one is in Tony Canyon; and, one is along the Book Cliffs Divide Road. The sites contain only a steel fire ring. These sites and a small number of undesignated sites are used during big game hunting seasons with each being occupied perhaps for a total of 15 nights annually. The review area has retained its appearance of naturalness. Human-made disturbances are substantially unnoticeable.

Chemical vegetative treatments have been conducted on populations of white-top, hen bane, Russian knapweed, and hounds tongue. Both back-pack and ATV boom sprayers have been used.

About 100 acres of Dick Canyon was burned in the early 1980s. The area is reclaiming naturally, and young Douglas fir trees are reestablishing on the slopes.

An interdisciplinary team reviewed the Hells Hole Canyon area and determined that any additional human-made disturbances since 2002 did not diminish naturalness for the area. The area reviewed by the BLM Vernal Field Office within the office planning boundaries is less than 5,000 acres in size. The Hells Hole Canyon review area does continue into the Moab Field Office planning area. The BLM Moab Field Office does administratively endorse the area as containing wilderness characteristics.

- (3). **Solitude, Primitive and Unconfined Recreation:** The steep slopes, canyons, and heavy vegetation screen the visitor and provide opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation.
- (4). **Supplemental Values:** Scenic views are afforded the visitor due to the steep slopes and topographic relief. The area provides habitat for mule deer and elk. Habitat for several sensitive species may be found in the review area.
- (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:

HELLS HOLE CANYON AREA			
Type of Lands	Non WSA Lands With Wilderness Characteristics (acres)	Non WSA Lands Without Wilderness Characteristics (acres)	Total Acres
UWC, Externally Nominated	2,709	0	2,709
WIA, BLM Identified	0	0	0
TOTAL ACRES	2,709	0	2,709

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 Sturges 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.