

Great Falls Basin

CDCA 132



GREAT FALLS BASIN WILDERNESS STUDY AREA (WSA)

(CDCA-132)

1. THE STUDY AREA

6,502 acres

The Great Falls Basin WSA is located in Inyo County within the northern portion of the California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA). The community of Trona is four miles to the south. The WSA includes 6,039 acres of public land under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and 463 acres of private land (see Map 1 and Table 1).

Section lines virtually form the entire WSA boundary. The northern boundary crosses mountainous terrain on the south side of Homewood Canyon. The eastern boundary is located near the edges of the mountains and the alluvial fan. The southern boundary is along the north side of Wilson Canyon within the steep portion of the Argus Mountain Range. The China Lake Naval Weapons Center forms the western boundary which is near the crest of the Argus Mountains.

The physical geography of the WSA is very steep with jagged ridges, sharp peaks, and deep, steep-faced canyons which drain to the east. Heavy erosional and uplifting forces have caused the Great Falls Basin area to have a quality of ruggedness. The mountain elevations within this WSA range from 2,000 feet to 4,500 feet. The mountain range appears striated because of ancient sedimentation and has a variety of colors, ranging from reds to browns and oranges to golds. Vegetation is mixed desert scrub, with the dominant plant being creosote. In the higher elevations, the vegetation changes to heavier upland scrub with yucca, mountain mahogany, and some pinyon and juniper trees.

Virtually the entire WSA is contained within the Great Falls Basin Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC).

The WSA was studied under Section 603 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA). Four alternatives were analyzed in the Draft and Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the CDCA Plan, protection, use, balanced, and no action, and a summary of the area's wilderness values was included in Appendix III of the Final EIS.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE ---

0 acres recommended for
wilderness
6,039 BLM acres recommended
for nonwilderness

No wilderness is the recommendation for the Great Falls Basin WSA. The entire acreage in this WSA is released for uses other than wilderness. Future activities in the area will be controlled by low intensity management as prescribed in the CDCA Plan. This recommendation will be implemented in a manner which will use all practical means to avoid or minimize environmental impacts.

The Balanced Alternative is the environmentally preferable alternative as outlined in the CDCA Plan and further explained in the California Wilderness Study Overview.

Marginal opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined types of recreation, identified energy and mineral potentials, and manageability issues are the major rationale for the decision to recommend this area as nonsuitable for wilderness. The existing ACEC Management Plan directs use and management of sensitive wildlife values in the area. Designation of the area as wilderness would not contribute any additional unique or distinct features to the National Wilderness Preservation System. Other WSAs in the California Desert that are recommended suitable offer a much more extensive and diverse representation of desert wilderness values.

Wilderness values are present in the WSA, although they cannot be considered outstanding. This WSA provides minimal opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined types of recreation. The large block of private land prevents access into and across the entire southern portion of the area. The western boundary of the WSA is totally closed to the public because it is the border of the Naval Weapons Center.

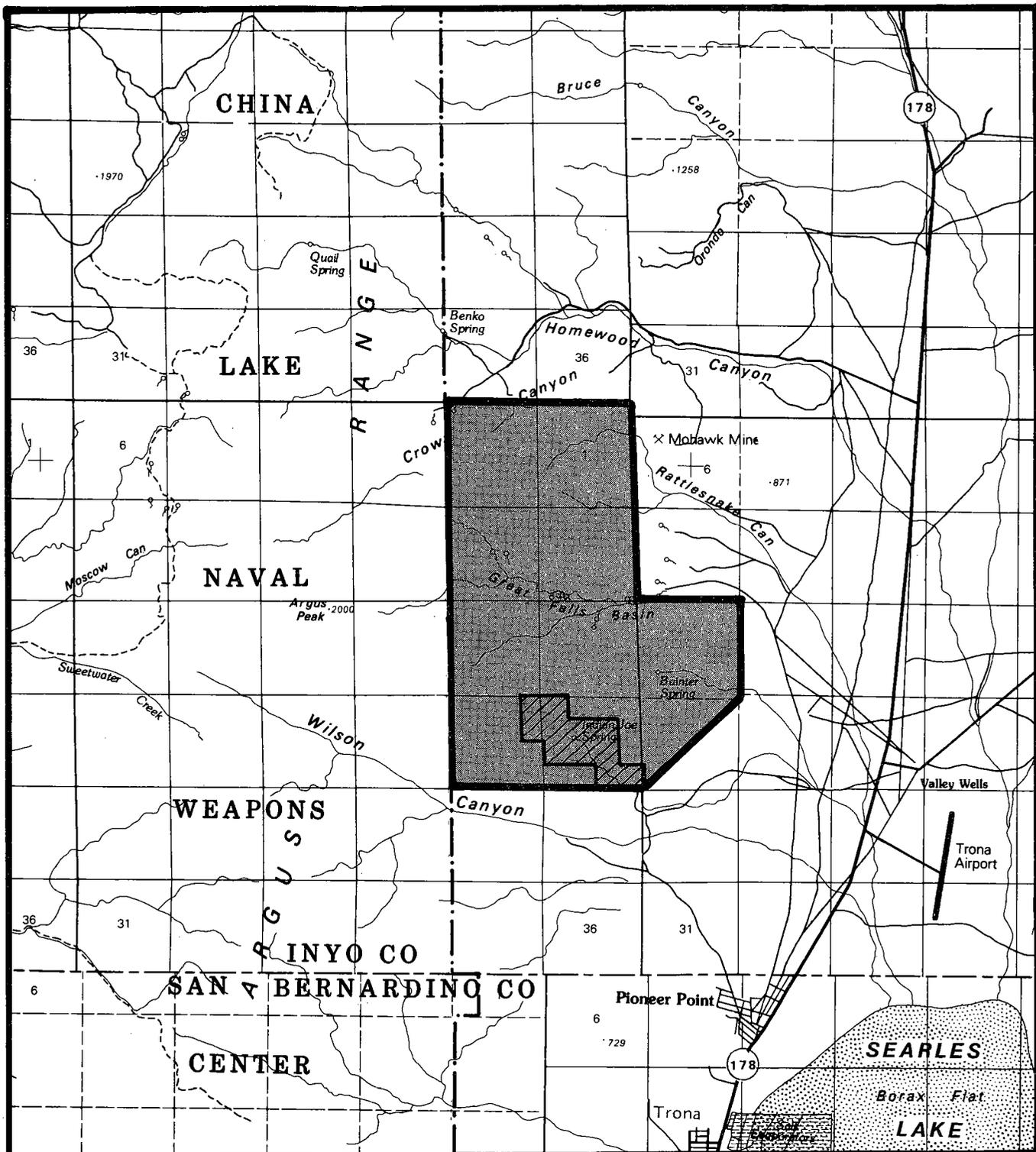
The Argus Mountain Range has long been recognized for its known and potential energy and mineral values. Mining claims encumber over 5% of the WSA. These claims are located primarily in the northern part of the WSA where there are high potentials for gold, lead and tin. The likelihood of an economical discovery is considered good. Virtually the entire WSA has moderate potential for rare earths and the eastern extension has moderate potential for geothermal resources.

The WSA would be difficult to manage as wilderness. The area is small and narrow, only two to two and one-half miles wide and four miles in length. Private land intrudes into the WSA for about one mile and affects the entire southern portion of the WSA. An extensive series of water diversion pipelines are located within all of the major drainage systems in the WSA. This entire water collection system is authorized under a 1902 right-of-way grant. Although not currently in use, if the diversion system needed to be updated, mechanical equipment would be necessary to repair the system. Wilderness values throughout the entire WSA would be adversely impacted. There are approximately eight miles of routes of travel including primitive ways, washes and other unmaintained routes of access which will remain available for vehicular use.

The Great Falls area does contain recognized riparian and wildlife values. Virtually the entire WSA is within the Great Falls Basin ACEC designated in the California Desert Conservation Area Plan. The area was set aside as an ACEC for the Inyo brown towhee, a State-listed rare bird species, and for natural and scenic values. Numerous springs within the canyons of the WSA are important habitat for the Inyo brown towhee. The area has provided habitat for desert bighorn sheep in the past and could provide habitat for reintroduction of this species in the future.

The WSA is within the Centennial Wild Horse/Burro Herd Management Area. Water within the WSA is currently utilized by burros. Two areas of cultural resource sensitivity are located within the WSA. The region also generally encompasses historic Panamint-Shoshone occupation and collection sites.

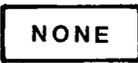
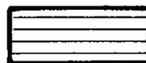
The WSA would be best managed and maintained under nonwilderness and low intensity, management guidelines as prescribed in the CDCA Plan. The minimal wilderness values that are present do not warrant the additional effort that would be required to manage the area as wilderness. High quality riparian and wildlife values are managed and protected in the ACEC Management Plan.

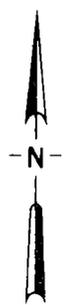


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R42E R43E

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|---|---|----------------------------|---|--------------|
|  | NONE | RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |  | SPLIT ESTATE |
|  | RECOMMENDED FOR NONWILDERNESS | |  | STATE |
|  | LAND OUTSIDE WSA RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS | |  | PRIVATE |



**Great Falls Basin
Proposal
MAP-1**



CDCA-132
JUNE, 1988

TABLE 1 - Land Status and Acreage Summary of the Study Area

<u>Within Wilderness Study Area</u>		<u>Acres</u>
BLM	(surface and subsurface)	6,039
Split Estate	(BLM surface only)	0
Inholdings		
State		0
Private		463
Total		<u>6,502</u>
 <u>Within the Recommended Wilderness Boundary</u>		 <u>Acres</u>
BLM	(within WSA)	0
BLM	(outside WSA)	0
Split Estate	(within WSA)	0
Split Estate	(outside WSA)	0
Total BLM Land Recommended for Wilderness		<u>0</u>
Inholdings		
State		0
Private		0
 <u>Within the Area Not Recommended for Wilderness</u>		 <u>Acres</u>
BLM	(surface and subsurface)	6,039
Split Estate	(BLM surface only)	0
Total BLM Land Not Recommended for Wilderness		<u>6,039</u>

3. CRITERIA CONSIDERED IN DEVELOPING THE WILDERNESS RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Wilderness Characteristics

1. Naturalness: The WSA retains most of its primeval character. However, historically the area was used as a water gathering system to provide water for mineral production at the Trona Minerals Company. Although much of the system has fallen into disrepair, a right-of-way is still in effect on the diversion systems. The water was piped from springs within the WSA and gravity fed to collecting tanks outside of the WSA. The system traverses through six sections (3,840 acres) of the WSA and impacts every major drainage. The above water systems are noticeable within the drainages.

2. Solitude: Opportunities for solitude can be obtained within the canyons of the WSA. However, the WSA is only two to two and one-half miles wide and four miles long and the opportunities cannot be considered outstanding. The water collection system and the rank smell of nearby manufacturing facilities in Trona are a constant reminder of man's presence in the area.

This WSA is periodically overflowed by military aircraft as part of the national defense mission taking place in approved military operating areas and flight corridors. The visual intrusions and associated noise create periodic temporary effects on solitude which are deemed necessary and acceptable as a part of the defense preparedness of the nation.

3. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: Opportunities for unrestricted movement are somewhat limited throughout the entire WSA. The configuration of the WSA, as well as the extensive water collection system, have a restrictive affect. Movement is also restricted on the western boundary of the WSA due to the Naval Weapons Center boundary which is totally closed to entry. An area of 440 acres of "posted" private land lies within the boundary in the southern end of the WSA. The private land blocks unrestricted movement within the entire southern portion of the area and lessens the opportunities for primitive and unconfined types of recreation.
4. Special Features: The flora and fauna in the area is somewhat unusual. Virtually the entire WSA is within the Great Falls Basin ACEC. The ACEC area is set aside for scenic values and protection of habitat for the Inyo brown towhee, a State-listed rare bird species. The area also has had historic use by desert bighorn sheep, although no sheep have been reported within the area for many years. Seeps and springs, with associated riparian habitat, are located throughout the WSA in the canyon areas.

B. Diversity in the National Wilderness Preservation System
(NWPS)

1. Assessing the diversity of natural systems and features as represented by ecosystems: This WSA contains 6,039 acres of the American Desert/Creosote Bush ecosystem. The Great Falls Basin WSA would not increase the diversity of the types of ecosystems represented in the NWPS. This ecosystem is represented by many other WSAs in the CDCA that are recommended suitable for wilderness designation.

Table 2 - Ecosystem Representation

Bailey-Kuchler Classification Domain/Province/PNV	NWPS Areas		Other BLM Studies	
	areas	acres	areas	acres
<u>NATIONWIDE</u>				
American Desert/Creosote Bush	1	343,753	117	4,261,870
<u>CALIFORNIA</u>				
American Desert/Creosote Bush	1	343,753	88	3,648,066

2. Expanding the opportunities for solitude or primitive recreation within a day's driving time (five hours) of major population centers: The WSA is within a five-hour drive of nine major population centers. Table 3 summarizes the number and acreage of designated areas and BLM study areas within a five-hour drive of the population centers.

Table 3
Wilderness Opportunities for Residents
of Major Population Centers

Population Centers California	NWPS areas		Other BLM Studies	
	areas	acres	areas	acres
Anaheim-Santa Ana	25	2,823,534	153	5,703,616
Bakersfield	32	4,071,358	128	3,998,548
Fresno	35	4,048,852	28	460,790
Los Angeles-Long Beach	27	2,876,234	135	4,958,751
Oxnard-Ventura	23	2,195,198	85	2,703,260
Riverside-San Bernardino	22	2,031,054	205	7,658,649
Santa Barbara-Santa Maria- Lompoc	20	1,166,142	35	528,590
San Diego	15	1,043,680	100	3,378,814
Visalia-Tulare-Porterville	34	4,431,635	61	1,681,921

3. Balancing the geographic distribution of wilderness areas: The WSA is within 50 air miles of 14 BLM WSAs recommended for wilderness designation. The closest designated wilderness area is Domeland Wilderness, administered by Sequoia National Forest, 40 miles west of the WSA.

C. Manageability

The Great Falls Basin WSA is manageable as wilderness. However, several significant issues have a high potential to complicate manageability of the area for wilderness.

The north, east, and southern boundaries follow no identifiable features, cutting across ridges and canyons. Demarkation and enforcement of such boundaries will require special attention.

Management of the entire southern portion of the WSA is compromised by a block of private land extending the length of Indian Joe Canyon. Development of this land for residential or industrial purposes would be incompatible with wilderness management. The private land also effectively breaks up the southern portion of the WSA into isolated compartments.

Spread throughout the entire WSA are a series of water pipelines in the major canyons. The pipelines have a right-of-way which dates back to 1902. Although they are currently non-operational, revitalization of the water collection system for the industrial needs of nearby Trona is possible. The resultant impacts of making the system operational would seriously threaten the ability to manage the already minimal quality wilderness values that are present.

The Argus Range has long been known for its mineral and energy values. The northern portion of the WSA has high potential for gold, lead and tin. Virtually the entire WSA has moderate potential for rare earths and the eastern portion has moderate potential for geothermal resources. The WSA, to the north and east, is rimmed with historic mines and evidences of mineral exploration. The 14 mining claims that encumber 300 acres of the WSA are primarily located at the north end of the WSA. Given the past history of the surrounding area, the likelihood for mineral development on valid existing mineral rights is considered very high.

Military overflights in this WSA must be considered to maintain the integrity of the existing and future national defense mission as well as the wilderness resource.

D. Energy and Mineral Resource Values

1. Summary of Information Known at the Time of the Preliminary Suitability Recommendation: The Great Basin WSA is located in the BLM Searles Geology-Energy-Mineral (G-E-M) Resource Area (GRA). BLM G-E-M data in the wilderness section of the CDCA plan EIS (Volume B, Appendix III) in 1980 stated that the WSA has potential for rare earths, tin, manganese, beryllium, and zirconium. As of December 12, 1979, no mining claims were recorded with the BLM in the WSA.

The 1980 BLM GRA report and file data support the CDCA plan EIS statement. The 1980 BLM GRA file documents geochemical data that shows a significant anomaly for rare earth mineralization throughout the entire WSA. Based on the geochemical evidence of anomalously high values for niobium and cerium, and significantly high values of lanthanum, and ytterbium, and a favorable geologic environment, the GRA report classified ninety percent of the WSA as having a moderate potential for the occurrence of rare earth mineralization (see accompanying mineral potential map). The northern one-third of the WSA is included in the Argus (formerly Sherman) Gold District. Nearby mines in the District, the Mohawk and Ruth, have produced in excess of 26,000 ounces of gold (1980 BLM GRA report). In addition, geochemical data documented in the 1980 BLM GRA file shows an anomaly for lead and tin in this area. Based on the geochemical evidence, and the presence of nearby gold mines which have produced gold in the past, the northern one-third of the WSA was classified by the 1980 BLM GRA report as having a high potential for the occurrence of gold, lead and tin. The GRA did not classify the WSA for manganese, beryllium or zirconium.

The eastern portion of the WSA was classified by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS, Conservation Division, 1979) as a Potential Geothermal Resource Area (PGRA). Based on this classification, the 1980 BLM GRA report stated that this area had a moderate potential for the occurrence of geothermal resources.

The entire WSA was classified by the 1980 BLM GRA report as having a low potential for the occurrence of saleable minerals (sand, gravel, crushed rock) based on the existence of favorable rock types. The GRA file data indicated that the while favorable rock types may exist, the remoteness of the WSA and high transportation costs to markets preclude the development of these deposits in the near future.

The 1980 BLM GRA report did not classify the WSA for the occurrence of uranium, sodium, potassium, and industrial minerals (limestone, barite, etc.) due to lack of sufficient data. However, the GRA report stated that favorable rock types often associated with uranium occurrences may be present.

2. Summary of Significant New Mineral Resource Data Collected Since the Preliminary Suitability Recommendation Which Should be Considered in the Final Recommendation: No U.S. Geological Survey or U.S. Bureau of Mines mineral survey was completed for this WSA because it is recommended nonsuitable for wilderness designation.

The nearby Kerr-McGee soda ash and calcium chloride facilities at Searies Lake continue to be upgraded and expanded. Nearly-final plans call for the construction of a large, electrical cogeneration plant capable of supplying Kerr-McGee power needs. The construction of this facility will require a significant amount of construction material (e.g., sand and gravel) which may be supplied by deposits

located in this WSA. However, absent current interest, the sand and gravel resources of the WSA are considered, at this time, as having a low potential for occurrence based on the BLM mineral classification system.

While little mineral occurrence data have been developed since 1980, the importance of the rare earth minerals has been recognized as critical to the development of new high-tech industries. Nearly 100% of all domestic rare earth minerals are currently produced from Molycorp's mine at Mountain Pass, California.

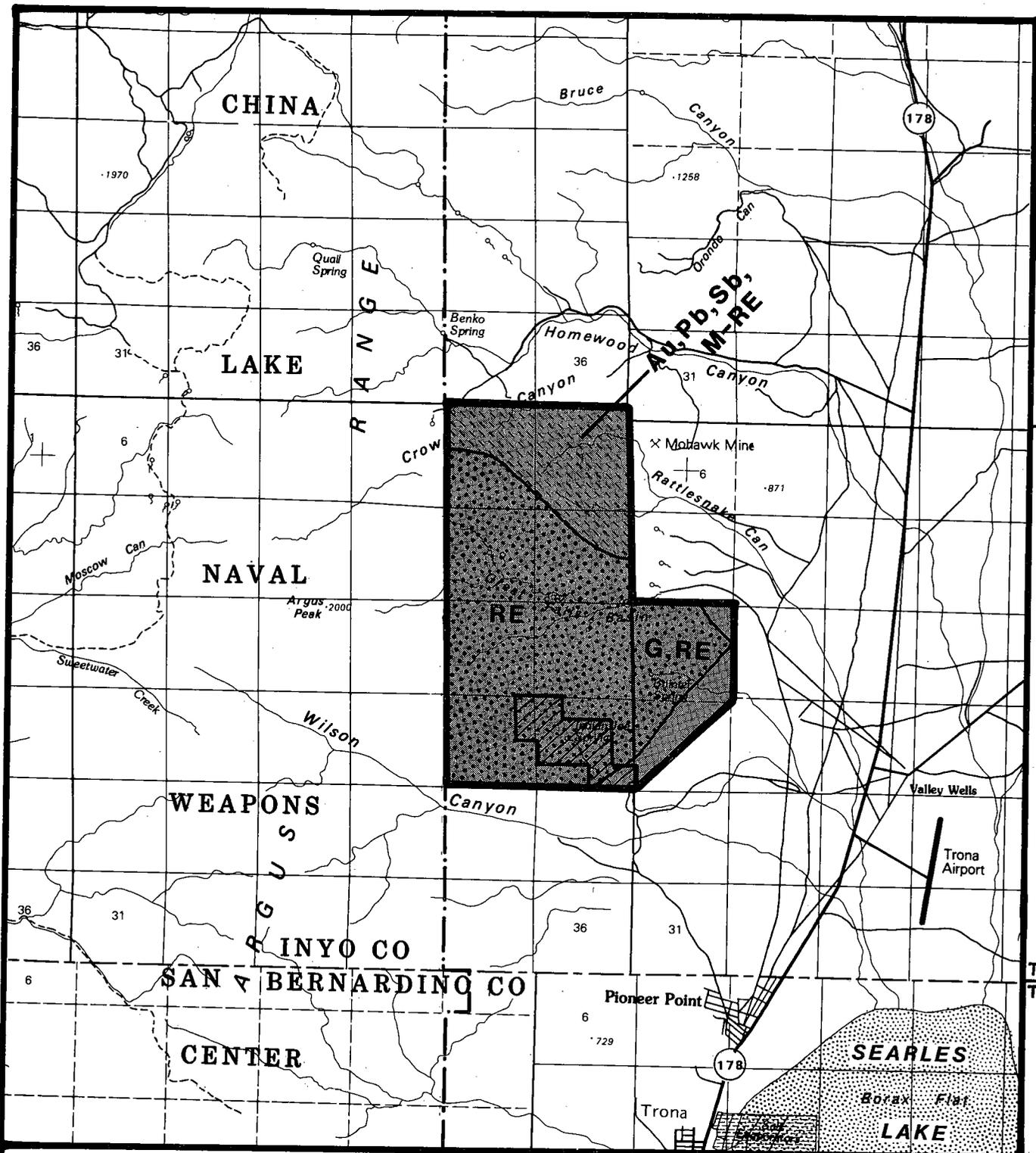
Unpatented mining claims in the area are located in the north-central portion of the WSA within the area classified as having a high occurrence potential for gold, lead and tin by the 1980 BLM GRA report. Mining Claims in the WSA are shown on Table 4 from BLM records dated January, 1988.

Table 4 - Mining Claims

TYPE	NUMBER			ACRES		
	SUITABLE	NONSUIT.	TOTAL	SUITABLE	NONSUIT.	TOTAL
Lode	N/A	13	13	N/A	260	260
Placer	N/A	1	1	N/A	40	40
Mill Site	N/A	0	0	N/A	0	0
Total	N/A	14	14	N/A	300	300

E. Summary of Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action

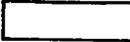
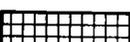
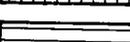
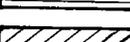
1. Impact on Wilderness Values: Noise, surface disturbance and access requirements for potential mineral and energy exploration and development could negatively impact naturalness, solitude, and primitive and unconfined types of recreation. However, according to the low intensity, management guidelines prescribed for the area in the CDCA Plan and the Great Falls Basin ACEC Plan, strict mitigating measures would be applied to all actions that have the potential to adversely affect sensitive resource values.
2. Impact on Minerals and Energy: Opportunities for exploration and development of minerals and energy would continue to be available subject to applicable laws, regulations and the low intensity, multiple use, management guidelines established in the CDCA Plan and the Great Falls Basin ACEC Plan.
3. Impact on ACEC and Wildlife Habitat: Opportunities for implementation of a complete spectrum of management actions would continue to be available to protect and enhance riparian and wildlife habitats. Potential development of mining operations are expected to result in site-specific impacts.
4. Impact on Wild Burro Management: Mechanized equipment could be available for use in managing populations to meet goals established in the CDCA Plan.



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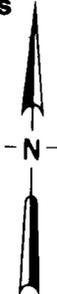
-  Recommended for Wilderness
-  Recommended for Non Wilderness
-  Land outside WSA Recommended for Wilderness
-  Split Estate
-  State
-  Private

Explanation

-  High Potential for the Occurrence of Energy and/or Non-energy Minerals
-  Moderate Potential for the Occurrence of Energy and/or Non-energy Minerals
- M** Moderate Mineral Potential Location in a High Mineral Potential Area
- H** High Mineral Potential Location in a Moderate Mineral Potential Area

Commodity Symbols

- Au** Gold
- G** Geothermal
- Pb** Lead
- RE** Rare Earths
- Sb** Antimony



**Great Falls Basin
Mineral Resource Potential**



**MAP-2
CDCA-132**

5. Impact on Cultural Resources and Native American Concerns:

Cultural resources will continue to be protected by applicable laws and regulations. The low intensity land use prescription for the WSA, as stated in the CDCA Plan and ACEC Plan, would further reduce the likelihood for adverse impacts to known cultural sites. Traditional access would also continue to be available for access to collection areas.

F. Local Social and Economic Considerations

No local social or economic considerations were identified in the Final CDCA Plan and EIS. Therefore, no further discussion of this topic will occur in this document.

G. Summary of WSA - Specific Public Comments

Public comments were solicited throughout all phases in the development of the CDCA Plan, finalized in 1980. Issues raised by the public during the Inventory and Study Phase were taken into account during development of the Draft Plan Alternatives and Proposed Plan. The following is a summary of all comments received. Inaccuracies that are known to exist are noted in parentheses.

1. Inventory Phase: Many of the comments addressing the inventory indicated the presence of man's work in the area. Many other comments stated that portions of the area had wilderness values. A recheck of the area identified a portion of the area meeting Section 2(c) criteria. Other comments received dealt with study phase issues.
2. Study Phase: Forty-one responses were received on this WSA, 22 favoring and 17 opposing wilderness designation, and two which were neutral. Proponents were most concerned that the Great Falls Basin be given Wilderness status. They cited its outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation, its inaccessibility due to geologic barriers, and its unique features which include waterfalls, a stream, rock jams, a granite "bathtub", and a riparian area with willows and water plants, a rare fern and the State-listed Inyo brown towhee are found there. Even opponents of wilderness in other parts of the original WSA 132 wished to protect this particular area. The proximity of the WSA to the Naval Weapons Center was cited as an advantage by a few wilderness proponents.

Wilderness opponents listed many roads and mining structures and activities which they believed were inconsistent with wilderness. A field recheck led to the deletion of several portions of the original WSA. Some respondents expressed the desire to continue hunting and motorized vehicle use in the area. The impression was expressed that the government has already taken over too much of the land and that this area should be left open for mining and recreational use.

Two letters were received in response to the Public Input Workbook. One expressed approval of wilderness for this area. The other was from the owner of land in Indian Joe Canyon. He stated that it was unnecessary to declare the Great Falls Basin Wilderness, since it was so well protected by natural barriers.

3. Draft Plan Alternatives: No public comments specific to this WSA were received in response to the Draft Plan Alternatives. However, this WSA was one of those opposed by the National Outdoor Coalition, a coalition of mining, rock-hounding, and off-highway vehicle groups. A large number of club members sent in printed coupons and letters supporting this position. Conservation organizations and their members wrote many letters recommending wilderness designation for all WSAs within the CDCA. The Inyo County Board of Supervisors opposed wilderness designation for this area.
4. Proposed Plan: There were no specific comments on this particular WSA in response to the Proposed Plan. Motorized vehicle organizations and conservation groups maintained the same positions stated for the Draft Alternatives, as did the Inyo County Board of Supervisors.

