

Slate Range

CDCA 142

SLATE RANGE WILDERNESS STUDY AREA (WSA)

(CDCA-142)

1. THE STUDY AREA --- 102,802 acres

The Slate Range WSA is located in Inyo County in the north-central portion of the California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA). The closest community is Trona, located roughly 30 miles to the southwest. The WSA includes 100,565 acres of public land, under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), 1,837 acres of State lands and private inholdings totalling 400 acres (See Map 1 and Table 1).

This "L"-shaped WSA is bounded on the northwest by a dirt road crossing the Panamint Valley to Ballarat. From this point, the northern boundary heads south, following Wingate Road, until it is intersected by a road up Goler Wash. Trending north, the boundary then roughly follows Goler Wash road, avoiding disturbed areas around Meyer Ranch, until the road reaches the Death Valley National Monument Boundary. The monument boundary delineates the eastern WSA boundary. To the south, the boundary follows the edge of the China Lake Naval Weapons Center. The western boundary follows the ridgeline of the Slate Range, eliminating one area of disturbance with a short cherrystem. Midway along its length, the western boundary drops over the ridge and then follows a number of dirt roads until it closes with the northwestern boundary.

The terrain of this area is diverse and includes the Slate and Panamint Mountains and their associated canyons and bajadas. The area also includes Panamint Valley and a large salt pan located just east of the Slate Range. The Slate and Panamint Mountains are varied in topography, having smooth and jagged ridges, sharp peaks, flat mountain tops, shallow washes and steep canyons. The mountains are rocky and display a variety of colors from tan to red to gold. The associated bajada gently slopes south and east into Panamint Valley and is interlaced with very shallow washes. The valley contains a large salt pan in the eastern portion. The vegetation consists mainly of low desert scrub, with the dominant plant being creosote bush. There are a few scattered cholla in the bajada. The area is unusually diverse, representing a cross-section of Great Basin Lowland and Upland Desert conditions. The elevation varies with the low flatlands averaging 2,400 ft rising to 5,805 ft. at Needle Peak.

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 Statements (EIS) for the CDCA Plan: protection, use, balanced, and no action; a summary of the area's wilderness values was included in Appendix III of the Final EIS.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE --- 44,536 acres recommended for wilderness
56,029 BLM acres recommended for nonwilderness

Partial Wilderness (40% suitable) is the recommendation for this WSA. The 56,029 acres in this WSA recommended nonsuitable are released for uses other than wilderness. The majority of the suitable portion consists of public lands. 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 Desert Plan and further explained in the California Wilderness Study Overview.

The eastern portion of this WSA is recommended suitable because it possesses outstanding wilderness values and numerous special features that would be enhanced by wilderness designation. The wilderness values of naturalness, opportunities for solitude and opportunities for primitive and unconfined types of recreation are outstanding within the suitably recommended area. There are no known routes of travel within the suitable portion of the WSA.

Lacking virtually any type of vehicle access, the area escaped from man's impacts. Remote and inaccessible terrain have acted as an impenetrable barrier to human activities, leaving the area in a primitive condition.

Opportunities for solitude are outstanding; the feeling of aloneness is easily achieved. The broken terrain provides countless hideaways where seclusion can be found. The study area's remote locale deters all but the most avid back-country recreationists, so it is rare when more than a handful of people share this large tract.

Primitive recreation opportunities are available throughout the suitable area. The lack of man-made obstacles lends to a sense of freedom and unconfinement. Because this area is adjacent to administratively-endorsed wilderness areas in Death Valley National Monument, opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined types of recreation are enhanced.

The area includes several special features that would benefit from wilderness designation of the area. These special features include a bighorn sheep herd and areas of cultural sensitivity and/or significance. The special features are further explained in the Wilderness Characteristics section.

Within the suitable area, there are few resource conflicts. The main conflict involves loss of opportunities for mineral exploration and development. Within the suitable area, there are two small areas with mineral potential: one area on the western boundary possesses high potential for the occurrence of gold, silver, copper, lead and tungsten; the second area, near the northern border, has moderate potential for the occurrence of silver and gold. Interest in developing these mineral reserves is low at this time, as witnessed by the lack of mining claims in the area.

The remaining acreage within the study area is recommended as nonsuitable because, although its wilderness values are of good quality, it possesses significant areas of high mineral potential. Within the nonsuitable area, there are geologic formations which possess high potential for the occurrence of sodium, potassium, silver, gold, copper lead, tungsten and limestone, as well as moderate potential for the occurrence of geothermal resources, silver, gold, lead, zinc, sodium and potassium. Interest in developing these minerals is indicated by the number of mining claims located in the nonsuitable area; a total of 180 as of December, 1987. There are approximately 40 miles of routes of travel including primitive ways, washes and other unmaintained routes of access within the nonsuitable area which will remain available for vehicular use.

Although this area possesses wilderness values that satisfy the 2(c) criteria of the 1964 Wilderness Act, these values did not override the value of the mineral reserves of the Slate Range and the Panamint Valley. These reserves cover roughly 60% of the entire nonsuitable acreage.

R43E R44E

R44E R45E

R45E R46E

R46E R47E MDM R1E SBM

T22S
T23S
MDM

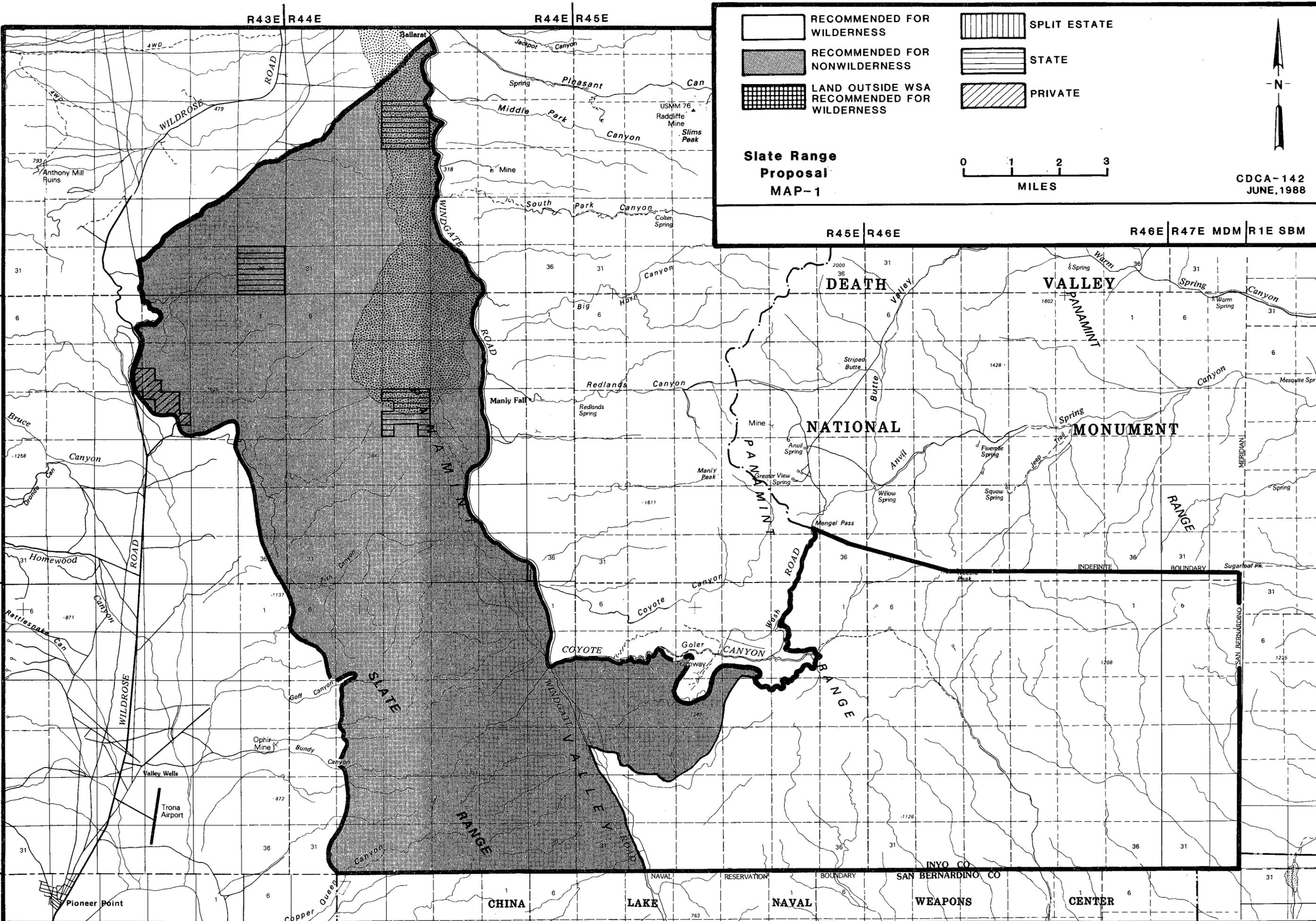
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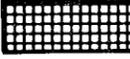
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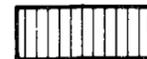
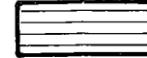
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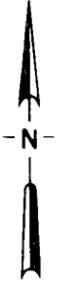
T20N
T19N



-  RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS
-  RECOMMENDED FOR NONWILDERNESS
-  LAND OUTSIDE WSA RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS

-  SPLIT ESTATE
-  STATE
-  PRIVATE

**Slate Range
Proposal
MAP-1**



CDCA-142
JUNE, 1988

DEATH VALLEY NATIONAL MONUMENT

SLATE RANGE

INYO CO. SAN BERNARDINO CO.
NAVAL WEAPONS CENTER

CHINA

LAKE

NAVAL

CENTER

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

<u>Within Wilderness Study Area</u>		<u>Acres</u>
BLM	(surface and subsurface)	100,565
Split Estate	(BLM surface only)	0
Inholdings		
State		1,837
Private		400
Total		<u>102,802</u>
 <u>Within the Recommended Wilderness Boundary</u>		 <u>Acres</u>
BLM	(within WSA)	44,536
BLM	(outside WSA)	0
Split Estate	(within WSA)	0
Split Estate	(outside WSA)	0
Total BLM Land Recommended for Wilderness		<u>44,536</u>
Inholdings		
State		0
Private		0
 <u>Within the Area Not Recommended for Wilderness</u>		 <u>Acres</u>
BLM	(surface and subsurface)	56,029
Split Estate	(BLM surface only)	0
Total BLM Land Not Recommended for Wilderness		<u>56,029</u>

3. CRITERIA CONSIDERED IN DEVELOPING THE WILDERNESS RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Wilderness Characteristics

1. Naturalness: The suitable area possesses pristine conditions characterized by diverse and rugged terrain. This area is totally affected by pristine natural forces. The nonsuitable area is equally as natural throughout most locations. A few primitive ways provide access to Panamint Dry Lake and an assortment of mining scars can be found in the Slate Range, but these imprint's of man are substantially unnoticeable.

2. Solitude: With the diverse terrain, high peaks and steep canyons, outstanding opportunities for solitude are present throughout. The rugged topography acts to screen visitors from one another. Conversely, the open lowlands of Panamint Valley allow expansive vistas of the Panamint, Slate and Argus Ranges.

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: The diversity of landforms and the pristine condition lend themselves to primitive types of recreation. Opportunities are further enhanced by adjacent values found in the administratively-endorsed wilderness areas located in Death Valley National Monument.
4. Special Features: The most significant wildlife species within this WSA is the desert bighorn sheep (Ovis canadensis nelsoni). The population size fluctuates, but numbers approximately 20 sheep. Desert bighorn are considered a sensitive species by California BLM. At least one prairie falcon nesting site exists inside this area. Prairie falcons and golden eagles utilize the area for foraging on a regular basis.

The south end of the Panamint Range within this area contains resources traditionally exploited by Owens Valley Paiute and Panamint Shoshone Native Americans from the Death Valley area. Vegetative material continues to be collected from the Needles Peak area. There are two known cultural resources sites located in the suitable wilderness study area. Although little is known about this area, favorable indications do exist for additional sites.

B. Diversity in the National Wilderness Preservation System

1. Assessing the diversity of natural systems and features as represented by ecosystems: This WSA contains 100,565 acres of the American Desert/Creosote Bush (Larrea) ecosystem. Landforms consist of extremely rugged, steep canyons with an associated bajada which contains Creosote bush, Sagebrush and Juniper-pinyon woodlands. Designation of this area as wilderness would not add diversity to the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Table 2 - Ecosystem Representation

Bailey-Kuchler Classification Domain/Province/PNV	<u>NWPS Areas</u>		<u>Other BLM Studies</u>	
	<u>areas</u>	<u>acres</u>	<u>areas</u>	<u>acres</u>
<u>NATIONWIDE</u>				
American Desert/Creosote Bush	1	343,753	117	4,167,344
<u>CALIFORNIA</u>				
American Desert/Creosote Bush	1	343,753	88	3,553,540

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

Table 3
Wilderness Opportunities for Residents
of Major Population Centers

<u>Population Centers</u>	<u>NWPS areas</u>		<u>Other BLM Studies</u>	
	<u>areas</u>	<u>acres</u>	<u>areas</u>	<u>acres</u>
<u>California</u>				
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
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 11 BLM WSAs recommended for wilderness designation. Roughly 50 miles west lie the closest designated wilderness areas, South Sierra and Domeland Wilderness Areas, both administered by Sequoia National Forest.

C. Manageability

The Slate Range WSA is manageable as wilderness. However, management of the nonsuitable portion would be extremely difficult.

Within the suitable portion, there are no major issues that would preclude or complicate the effective management of the area as wilderness. The area possesses easily managed boundaries consisting of administrative boundaries along the north, east and south and a well defined road along the western boundary. The surrounding public land, administered by the National Park Service and the military, prevents vehicles from accessing the suitable area, thereby reducing the possibility of inadvertent intrusions.

The area contains virtually no resources or uses which would conflict with wilderness designation. The suitable portion contains no private or State inholdings.

Conversely, the nonsuitable area would be extremely difficult to manage, primarily because of mineral exploration and development activities that will occur there. The nonsuitable portion of the WSA contains over 180 mining claims, many of which may have valid existing rights to develop under the General Mining Law of 1872. Although claimants cannot cause unnecessary or undue degradation to public lands, they may have sufficient latitude to impact existing wilderness values.

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 Slate Range WSA is located in the BLM Darwin/Slate Range and Panamint Geology-Energy-Mineral (G-E-M) Resource Area(s) (GRA). The BLM G-E-M narrative in the wilderness section of the CDCA Plan EIS (Volume B, Appendix III) stated that mines and prospects located in the WSA have produced gold, silver, and lead (high occurrence potential). The EIS G-E-M narrative also stated that the WSA has a potential for halite, uranium, tungsten, pumice, perlite, bentonite, and zeolites. As of December 12, 1979, an estimated 30 to 50 unpatented mining claims and two patented claims located in the WSA were recorded with the BLM.

The 1980 BLM GRA report and data fully supports the G-E-M statement in the 1980 CDCA EIS. The mines and prospects immediately adjacent to and located in the WSA are encompassed by the Slate (gold) Mining District. Recorded production from the district is in excess of \$3,000,000 of gold, silver, lead and copper. The 1980 BLM GRA report classified the extreme northwestern part of the WSA as having a high potential for the occurrence of gold, silver, copper, lead and tungsten and a low occurrence potential for uranium. The January Jones Mine, located on the eastern slope of the Slate Range, has produced over 4,000 oz. gold from vein deposits in granitic rock. The area surrounding the January Jones Mine was classified by the 1980 BLM GRA report as having high potential for the occurrence of gold. An area of marine rock surrounded by

granite, outcropping on the east side of the Slate Range east of Manley Pass, was classified by the 1980 BLM GRA report as having a low potential for the occurrence of gold, silver, lead, tungsten and uranium based on gamma-ray anomalies and a favorable geologic environment. Two small areas, located in the central part of the WSA south of Goler Canyon, were classified by the 1980 BLM GRA report as having a moderate potential for the occurrence of lead, silver, zinc and a high potential for the occurrence of gold, silver, copper, lead and tungsten. The area of high potential contains mines (Crescent, Lotus,) with recorded production of gold, silver and lead.

The 1980 BLM GRA file documented a U.S. Geological Survey (USGS, Conservation Division, 1979) classification of the northern part of the WSA as prospectively valuable for oil and gas. This area was classified as having a low potential (1980 BLM GRA) for the occurrence of oil and gas based on the BLM classification system. In addition, the USGS classified an area in the extreme northwestern part of the WSA as a Potential Geothermal Resource Area (PGRA). The 1980 BLM GRA report classified the PGRA as having a moderate potential for the occurrence of geothermal resources. The central part of the WSA encompassing the Panamint Valley was classified by the 1980 BLM GRA report as having a high to moderate potential for the occurrence of potassium and sodium and a low potential for zeolites. The high to moderate BLM GRA classification was based on a USGS (1979, Conservation Div.) classification of the area as having known (high) value and prospective (moderate) value for these resources.

The entire southeastern part of the WSA was classified by the 1980 BLM GRA report as having low potential for the occurrence of sand, gravel, clay, cinder, pumice and crushed rock sources. The GRA file documented geologic data that shows volcanic rock types often associated with deposits of these commodities occurring in this part of the WSA.

2. Summary of Significant New Mineral Resource Data Collected Since the Preliminary Suitability Recommendation Which Should Be Considered in the Final Decision: In 1983-84, the U.S. Bureau of Mines (BOM) and U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) conducted independent mineral surveys of the portion of the WSA recommended suitable for wilderness designation. Results of the BOM study (Mineral Land Assessment MIA 104-83) were incorporated into a combined USGS/BOM report (Open-File Report 84-754) published by USGS in 1984. The following is a summary of the combined report.

There is no recorded mineral production from the mineral inventory study area and the only evidence of mineral development consists of inactive workings in one small area near the northern border of the WSA. This area, known as the Cliff Spring prospect, was classified as having a low potential for the occurrence of gold and silver. An area in the central part of the mineral inventory study area was

classified as having low potential for the occurrence of copper, molybdenum, gold and silver. A larger area in the central part of the mineral inventory study area was also classified as having a low potential for the occurrence of silver. Two small areas on the extreme western edge of the study area were classified as having a low potential for the occurrence of tungsten, molybdenum, gold, silver and copper.

The USGS combined report stated that the area contains substantial amounts of sand and gravel. The USGS report also stated that no evidence of geothermal resources or fossil fuels were found in the mineral inventory study area. The USGS combined report supports and upgrades the mineral potential of the recommended-suitable portion of the WSA as classified by the 1980 BLM GRA study.

In 1985, the State of California, Division of Mines and Geology (DMG), reviewed the USGS combined report and submitted supplemental data and recommendations to reclassify mineral potential areas identified in the USGS report. The DMG recommended the area surrounding the Cliff Spring prospect be reclassified as having a moderate potential for the occurrence of gold and silver. The attached map is a composite of the 1980 BLM GRA report, the USGS/BOM combined study and the DMG recommendations standardized in accordance with the BLM classification system.

Since 1980, no plans of operation have been filed in the BLM Ridgecrest Resource Area for mining exploration or development. However, an active production operation is ongoing at the Stockwell Mine, located outside the western boundary of the WSA. In 1987, the operator had produced 3,000 oz. of gold from new workings developed at the mine.

The California Division of Mines and Geology has begun field work for a Mineral Land Classification of the area encompassing and surrounding the WSA. The results of this study are expected in early 1989.

An eight acre sodium prospecting permit application is pending in the northwest portion of the WSA.

Unpatented mining claims in the WSA are summarized in the following table taken from BLM records dated January, 1988.

Table 4 - Mining Claims

TYPE MINING CLAIM	NUMBER			ACRES		
	SUITABLE	NONSUIT.	TOTAL	SUITABLE	NONSUIT.	TOTAL
Lode	0	174	174	0	3480	3480
Placer	0	1	1	0	40	40
Mill Site	0	5	5	0	25	25
Total	0	180	180	0	3545	3545

E. Summary of Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action

1. Impact on Wilderness Values: In the suitable area, wilderness values will be maintained. In the nonsuitable areas, naturalness will suffer localized impacts from mineral exploration and development. These impacts will be centered in the mineralized portions of the area, comprising roughly 30% of the WSA.
2. Impact on Mineral Exploration and Development: In the suitable area, this activity will be curtailed. It is not expected to be a significant impact as little potential currently exists and no claims are currently on file. In the nonsuitable area, however, mineral exploration and development will continue to be allowed subject to the regulations listed in 43 CFR 3809 regarding surface disturbance, as well as any additional constraints stated in the CDCA Plan.
3. Impact on Desert Bighorn Sheep/Habitat: The transient habitat in the Slate Range will suffer localized impacts from mineral exploration and development. Within this nonsuitable area, individual animals will occasionally be disturbed by human presence. In the suitable portion of the WSA, bighorn habitat will remain in its current state.
4. Impact on Native American Collection Activities: The proposed action will have negligible effects on Native American collecting activities. In the nonsuitable area, the activities will be allowed to continue as normal. In the suitable area, access is currently constrained because of terrain. Restrictions placed on the use of mechanized equipment within a designated wilderness area comprise the only adverse impacts to this activity.

F. Local Social and Economic Considerations

No local social or economic considerations were identified in the 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: Specific comments referred to mining activity and access roads. These were reevaluated by field checks and are shown on the current maps where appropriate.
2. Study Phase: Thirty-four letters were received on WSA 142 and 18 on WSA 141, which was combined with WSA 142. Of the 52 letters exactly half favored and half opposed wilderness designation.

The most common concerns raised by opponents of a suitable recommendation for this WSA were mining potential and recreational opportunities. Recreationists felt that the area was excellent for motorized vehicle use for rockhounding for obsidian, scheelite, limestone and quartz. Trailriding, hunting and camping were other desired uses. Others felt that the potential wilderness quality was diminished by the flat, muddy, desolate scenic quality, a microwave site, active mines, nearby urban areas and the noise of military overflights. One letter stated that the economies of Ballarat and Indian Wells depended on motorized vehicle use in the vicinity.

Those favoring wilderness designation pointed out the high scenic value of areas such as the east side of the Panamint range, Goler Wash, and the old Crescent Mine. The adjacent administratively-proposed wilderness area in Death Valley National Monument was felt to reinforce the suitability of this WSA. The need for protection of wildlife and vegetation was discussed, as was the desire for primitive recreation and areas for ecological and geologic study. Some suggested deleting active mines from the wilderness area.

Three responses to the Public Input Workbook (3/15/79) were received. All favored designation of this WSA as wilderness. The area contains bighorn sheep and good bighorn habitat in the eastern part (Panamint Mountains). The National Park Service agreed that the area is compatible with administratively-endorsed wilderness in Death Valley National Monument.

3. Draft Plan Alternatives: A variety of public comments not specific to WSA 142 were received in response to the Draft Desert Plan Alternatives. For example, one indicated complete agreement with the Protection Alternative, another agreed with the Use Alternative, while a third sought more wilderness than in the Protection Alternative. Another expressed the need to protect the Panamint Valley burros.

The National Outdoor Coalition (NOC), a coalition of mining, rockhounding and off-highway vehicle groups, recommended that this area be designated nonsuitable for wilderness. A large number of club members sent in printed coupons supporting this position. Conservation groups supported wilderness designation for the entire WSA. Comments were largely concerned with motorized vehicles - either the need for access for recreation or mineral exploration and development or the need to protect the sensitive natural values of the area from vehicular damage. The Board of Supervisors of Inyo County requested a nonsuitable (Multiple Use Class "M") designation for this area because of mineral resources.

4. Proposed Plan: There were practically no specific comments on this particular WSA in response to the Proposed Plan. Motorized vehicle groups and conservation organizations maintained the same positions stated for the Draft Alternatives, as did the Inyo County Board of Supervisors. The Naval Weapons Center at China Lake requested that the western half of the WSA be designated nonsuitable as they need this route into the Mojave B Range.