

Special Designations

Lately we've been writing about some of the various programs within the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) that make up the collaborative administration of your public lands. Last week we highlighted the Education division and shared information about the BLM's many resources and staffs available to support teachers and students in and out of the classroom. This week, we're shifting gears.

Did you know there are “regular” public lands *and* public lands with special protections? Aside from having to balance multiple uses, managers also have to recognize special land designations in some areas, which require extra attention to protect exceptional resource values. There are dozens of types of special land categories, each of which is either congressionally or administratively designated. The BLM's Burns District has the following special areas:

Wilderness: The wilderness idea — protection of the Nation's most pristine undeveloped lands — was born in the United States. Early supporters of a wilderness system saw a fundamental need to sustain the unique American character shaped by our national encounter with the wild frontier. Wilderness is congressionally designated and traditionally defined as “Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions.” Generally, motorized and mechanized uses are prohibited in Wilderness, though some special provisions exist for travel on existing roadways and for emergency, or as necessary for the administration of the area. The Steens Mountain Wilderness Area was designated by Congress in 2000, is around 170,000 acres, and is the only wilderness in the Burns District.

Wilderness Study Areas: The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 directed the Bureau to inventory and study its roadless areas for wilderness characteristics. To be designated as a Wilderness Study Area (WSA), an area had to have the following characteristics: Size - roadless areas of at least 5,000 acres of public lands or of a manageable size; Naturalness - generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature; Opportunities - provides outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined types of recreation. The BLM's Burns District has 24 administratively designated WSAs, totaling approximately 922,000 acres. All are south of Highways 20 and 78, except for one around Blue Bucket Creek (northwest of Drewsey). Until Congress makes a final determination on a WSA, the BLM manages these areas to preserve their suitability for official designation as wilderness.

Wild and Scenic Rivers/river segments: The National Wild and Scenic Rivers System was created by Congress in 1968 to preserve certain rivers with outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational values in a free-flowing condition. The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act is notable for safeguarding the special character of these rivers, while also recognizing the potential for their appropriate use and development. It encourages river management that crosses political boundaries and promotes public participation in developing goals for river protection. The BLM's Burns District has four Wild and Scenic Rivers/river segments, all on Steens Mountain: Donner und Blitzen River (87.5 miles), Fish Creek (.1 mile), Kiger Creek (4.3 miles), and Wildhorse Creek (9.6 miles).

National Back Country Byways: Back Country Byways are designated by BLM State Directors. These routes showcase the variety and richness of public lands off-the-beaten path! Most of the byways are either paved or graded gravel/dirt roads, passable in ordinary passenger cars. In Harney County, the 52-mile Steens Mountain Back Country Byway provides access to four



developed campgrounds, exceptional viewing opportunities at Kiger Gorge, East Rim, Big Indian Gorge, Steens Summit, Wildhorse and Little Blitzen Gorge overlooks, and dozens of recreation opportunities. The Diamond Loop Back Country Byway travels 69 miles through a patchwork of high desert terrains and gives visitors access to special places like the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, Pete French Round Barn, Diamond Craters, and the towns of Frenchglen and Diamond.

Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs): Areas of Critical Environmental Concern are areas within public lands where special management attention is required. The ACEC designation – unique to only BLM-administered lands – means that the BLM will give priority to the protection of these areas through land use planning processes. The BLM’s Burns District has 21 ACECs. These important places have historic, cultural or scenic value; or there may be sensitive, threatened or endangered species living there.

Special designations are important to the protection of public lands throughout Harney County. If you have any questions or concerns about management activities or public uses in these areas, please give us a call at (541) 573-4400. And remember...public land management is highly intricate on its most basic level. Despite the complex natural and social systems that are affected, balanced stewardship of public land resources is the BLM’s top priority.