

Summary of Findings and Conclusion

Unit Name and Number: **WIU #CDCA 131-5 (Proposed Olancha Greasewood ACEC)**

Summary

Results of Analysis:

1. Does the area meet any of the size requirements? **Yes**
2. Does the area appear to be natural? **Yes**
3. Does the area offer outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation? **Yes**
4. Does the area have supplemental values? **Yes**

Conclusion

The area has wilderness characteristics.

Prepared by:

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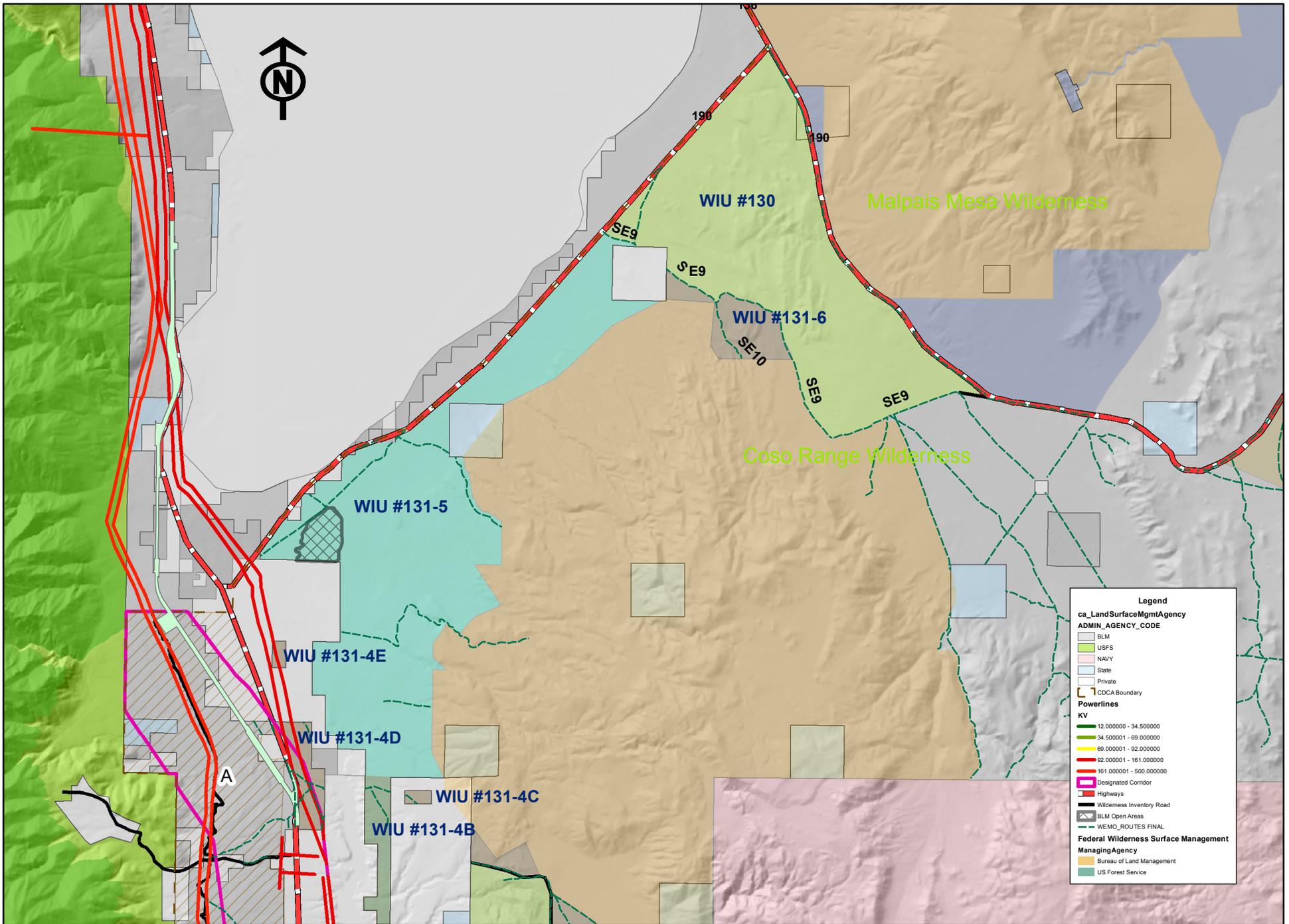
Approved by:



Field Manager

12/15/2014
Date

This form documents information that constitutes an inventory finding on wilderness characteristics. It does not represent a formal land use allocation or a final agency decision subject to administrative remedies under either 43 CFR parts 4 or 1610.5-2.



WIU #CDCA 131-5 (Greasewood ACEC)
February 2014



Year 2014 Inventory Unit Number/Name WIU #CDCA 131-5 (Proposed Olancha Greasewood ACEC)

FORM 1

Documentation of BLM Wilderness Inventory Findings On Record

1. Is there existing BLM wilderness inventory information on all or part of this area?

Yes

Inventory Source: 1979 CDCA Wilderness Inventory Final Descriptive Narratives, BLM Ridgecrest FO

Inventory Unit Name(s)/Number(s): WIU #CDCA 131 (Coso)

Map Name(s)/Number(s): USDI BLM CASO Wilderness Final Inventory, March 31, 1979

BLM District(s)/Field Office(s): Ridgecrest Field Office

2. BLM Inventory Findings on Record

Existing inventory information regarding wilderness characteristics:

Inventory Source: 1979 CDCA Wilderness Inventory Final Descriptive Narratives, BLM, Ridgecrest FO

Unit#/ Name	Size (acres)	Natural Condition? Y/N	Outstanding Solitude? Y/N	Outstanding Primitive & Unconfined Recreation? Y/N	Supplemental Values? Y/N
1979 Findings within WIU #CDCA 131 (North Cosos)	90,000+ (historic acres)	Y 26,486	Y 26,486	Y 26,486	Y 26,486
2014 Findings within WIU #CDCA 131-5 (Proposed Olancha Greasewood ACEC)	Y ~7,375 acres	Y	Y	Y	Y

Summarize any known primary reasons for prior findings in this table:

The original 1979 WIU #131 was huge, extending almost 40 miles north to south. The northwestern boundary was Highway 190, the northeastern boundary were the roads south of Highway 190, the western boundary was the access road to the power line along Highway 395, the eastern boundary was the China Lake Naval Air Weapons Station, and the southern boundary was approximately 4 miles south of Coso Junction.

The 1979 analysis and decision was that approximately 26,486 acres located in the Coso Mountains and Joshua Flat met wilderness criteria. However, the numerous mines and associated roads and trails in the remainder of the area, specifically in Cactus Flat, McCloud Flat, and in adjacent mountains to the west, had substantially noticeable imprints of man. As a result, these areas were found not to have wilderness character. They were subsequently dropped from the 26,486-acre Coso Range Wilderness Study Area (CDCA #131, Cosos).

The Coso Range Wilderness was designated in 1994. It encompassed all of the 26,486-acre Coso Range Wilderness Study Area (CDCA #131) and added an additional 22,810 acres. The Coso Range Wilderness added a total of 49,296 acres to the wilderness preservation system.

The portion of the original WIU currently under review here (**WIU #CDCA 131-5**) is west and north of the Coso Range Wilderness. The unit is located between the wilderness area and private property on the west, and between the wilderness area and Highway 190 on the north. It encompasses several northwesterly trending bajadas bisected by large wash systems and covered by blow sand, hummocks, and low sand dunes. The unit encompasses the publicly-owned, northern half of the Olancho sand dunes. These dunes make up a tiny and seldom-visited Off-Highway Vehicle Area of less than 500 acres. The area is contiguous with a proposed new ACEC identified in drafts of the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan (DRECP) as the Olancho Greasewood ACEC.

The area comprises approximately 7,375 acres of land immediately contiguous to the existing Coso Range Wilderness. A March 2014 inventory of this area found this unit to have wilderness character.

FORM 2

Documentation Of Current Wilderness Inventory Conditions

Unit Number/Name **WIU #CDCA 131--5 (Proposed Olancha Greasewood ACEC)**

(1) Sufficient size

Yes.

Acreage: ~7,375 acres estimated with GIS measuring tool. Acres need to be revised slightly downward to exclude a small sliver of land located north of SE2 and land within the 300' setback associated with Highway 190. This unit is immediately contiguous to the western and northern boundary of the Coso Range Wilderness.

Boundary revision: The southern boundary excludes private property and a small isolated section of public land between two private sections, the western boundary continues along the public/private property line to the intersection with SE2, the northern boundary follows SE2 and the edge of Highway 190's ROW to SE9, the northeastern boundary follows SE9 to a block of private land which it goes around to the Coso Range Wilderness boundary, and the eastern boundary follows the Coso Range Wilderness boundary back to the unit's southern boundary. See attached map.

Description of Current Conditions

Land ownership: BLM (~7,375 acres); private inholdings (0 acres).

Location: Approximately 5-15 miles east and northeast of Olancha, CA.

Topography: Colorful, heavily-eroded bajadas and alluvial fans coming off of the Coso Range, divided by several large wash systems. A small aggregation of sand dunes in the northwest corner extends north and east into successive waves of large sand dune hummocks with impressive greasewood stands.

Vegetation features: Vegetation is highly variable, ranging from low elevation, Coloradan desert species such as desert holly (*Atriplex hymenelytra*) to more typical Mohavean saltbush scrub, creosote scrub, lava bed and desert wash species, to scattered Joshua trees at higher elevations. The entire unit is encompassed by a proposed new DRECP ACEC (the Olancha Greasewood ACEC). The area of sand dune hummocks has an unusual plant assemblage described in the CDCA Plan as a Great Basin Enclave with greasewood (*Sarcobatus vermiculatus*) as the dominant plant.

Major human uses/activities: This area receives very little use. Very few vehicle routes extend into this area. Only three routes are in regular use currently. They are SE1, SE2, and an undesignated abandoned mine road. SE3 is completely washed out within a couple 100 yards of its intersection with SE2. It is shown on the map as being in a wash. The eastern end of SE2 is in sporadic use. The route is covered by heavy blow sand and hummocks in its middle and no longer exists as a through route. The western end of SE2 is in regular use for a short distance beyond the small county dump (transfer station) it accesses off of Highway 190. SE1 extends from Highway 190 (presumably crossing SE2) to the Olancha Dunes Off-Highway Vehicle Area. The route is very sandy and not appropriate for RV-use. There is one large, blown out area close to the highway where off-road vehicles have pulled off to dump appliances and to target shoot. However, there are no well-defined campsites in the vicinity. The dunes themselves appear to receive very little use. The area is used for film productions. Three to four film permits are issued for this area per year. No vehicle tracks were visible on the flanks or on top of the dunes on our site visits there. Tracks were observed skirting the dune's western perimeter. These tracks headed south leaving the public portion of the dunes to follow private property fence lines to an abandoned mine road extending up into the Coso Range and across the wilderness boundary to an old claypit. This route has not been identified as an open designated vehicle route under WEMO. The route can be accessed from Highway 395. However, access from the highway requires crossing private property, multiple fences, and deep sand.

(2) Natural condition

Yes. The area is extremely pristine, sweeping in extent, and largely inaccessible to vehicles due to deep sand, hummocks, and extremely rugged, badland-type terrain with severe erosion gullies.

Precedent exists for finding an Open Off-Highway Vehicle Area such as the Olancha Dunes to have wilderness characteristics. A portion of the Algodone Dunes have been found to have wilderness character. Little-used dune areas are very resilient to sporadic, light motor vehicle use. The Olancha Dunes showed little to no evidence of vehicle use on our site visit there. The Open Area only extends over the publicly-owned, northern half of the dune system. This area is under 500 acres (407.6 acres to be exact). It is arguably too small to be used effectively as an open vehicle play area. At 25 mph, an off-road vehicle could cross the entire expanse (1 mile) in a little over 2 minutes.

The unit as a whole is essentially roadless. There are only three open, designated vehicle routes (SE1, SE2, and SE3). SE3 is virtually non-existent beyond a couple 100 yards of its intersection with SE2. SE2 exists for some distance at either end but is blocked by deep sand and hummocks and no longer exists as a through route. SE1 extends for a short distance to the dune area. Further south, there is one, old, rehabbing mine road that is still visible and in regular use. This route is badly washed out in places and leads up to

and across the wilderness boundary to an abandoned claypit. In addition, there are a few short fragments of jeep trail scattered about the area. Most of these routes are not in-use or are in very infrequent use. All of these routes are undesignated and are blocked from legitimate public access by private property. None of these routes, designated or non-designated, qualifies as a wilderness inventory road.

There are very few manmade developments. A small transfer station (a discrete, fenced-in area with dumpsters) is located on the south side of SE2. This area lies immediately off of SE2 and needs to be excluded from the rest of the eligible unit. Other manmade developments in the area, the small, solar-powered installation (a weather station?) and the utility line paralleling and crossing Highway 190 are located outside of the eligible unit on the north side of SE2. Visible mining disturbances in the area, i.e., abandoned claypits, are located outside of the eligible unit, inside designated wilderness. With wilderness designation, it is extremely unlikely that any of these pits and/or any of the vehicle routes associated with them will be reopened in the future. There are no range fences and/or developments within this area.

Three factors have contributed to enhancing naturalness in the area:

- (1) The WEMO Plan Amendment reclassified most of the area previously thought of as an extension of the Olancha Dunes Off-Highway Vehicle Area as a Limited Use Area. The Olancha Dunes Off-Highway Vehicle Area is now restricted to a very small area of 407.6 acres.
- (2) Most of the area is inaccessible to vehicles.
- (3) No applications for clay or other types of material extraction or for any other type of mining have materialized. Historically most mines were located in the mountains, not out on the alluvial fans. These mines are now inside designated wilderness.
- (4) Cattle have not grazed this part of the Lacey-Cactus McCloud Allotment for 14 years and are unlikely to resume grazing here in the foreseeable future due to stipulations in the current grazing permit.

(3) Outstanding opportunities for solitude

Yes. Aircraft noise from military overflights is no more frequent here than elsewhere in the Ridgecrest Field Office Area. Highway noise was remarkably absent. Distance and intervening topography made the highways invisible from most locations within the unit. The natural area appears to extend across an uninterrupted expanse to the Northern Coso Range, the Sierra Nevadas, the Owens Valley and the Inyo Mountains.

Vehicle tracks were confined mostly to the western and eastern ends of SE2, SE1 to the base of the dunes, along the western perimeter of the dunes, south along some private fence lines and up an abandoned mine road where they continued across the wilderness boundary. The vast majority of the area showed no visible traces of motor vehicle use at all. It appears that very few people visit this area. We hiked up the wash which SE3 dumped into and saw no human or vehicle tracks within a couple of hundred yards of start of the route. We hiked through the greasewood hummocks where SE2 gave out at either end and saw no tracks as well. We drove in on SE1 and climbed up to the top of

the sand dunes within the Open Area and saw no vehicle tracks on the dunes in any direction. We hiked across private property and deep sand, past several private fence lines, to reach the abandoned mine road and saw tracks running the fence lines to intercept the mine road. These tracks continued up and around obstacles (ruts) in the road to cross the wilderness boundary. However, when we looped back on several fragments of road we saw no tracks. We encountered only two vehicles during the time we were out there on a weekend. They were heading south along the western perimeter of the dunes. It was easy to feel quite alone and isolated, well out of sight and reach of other people.

(4) Outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation

Yes. The area offers a number of high quality, primitive, non-confined, non-motorized recreational opportunities for cross-country hiking, short overnight backpacking, and photography. There are very few visible routes of travel. Visitors can expect to explore the dunes, cut across the greasewood hummocks, climb the alluvial fans, and follow any number of washes and canyons leading up into wilderness, with little to no motor vehicle competition or interference. One could visit this area multiple times without taking the same route of travel. This is a relatively large expanse (more than 7,000 acres) of very pristine, undeveloped land immediately contiguous to wilderness. One looks out over the Northern Cosos, the Sierras, Owens Valley, and the Inyos, with little to no awareness of the intervening highways or developments in the distance. The country is relatively easy to cross on foot or on horseback. Wilderness-type opportunities are available to virtually anyone, regardless of age or physical condition.

(5) Supplemental values

Yes. WIU #CDCA 131-5 is a large area of undisturbed, pristine wildlife habitat contiguous with the northern part of the Coso Range Wilderness Area. The unit adds an additional expanse of natural environment, increasing the size of wildlife movement corridors and valuable, unfragmented habitat.

Plants:

- Creosote bush mixed scrub
- Mid-elevation mixed desert scrub, which contains dominants of spiny menadora (*Mendora spinescens*), Mormon tea (*Ephedra nevadensis*), and Joshua tree (*Yucca brevifolia*)
- Saltbush scrub, containing desert holly (*Atriplex hymenelytra*), shadscale (*Atriplex confertifolia*), and other saltbush (*Atriplex*) species
- Plants associated with desert wash systems
- Greasewood (*Sarcobatus vermiculatus*) hummocks
- Plants associated with active sand dunes

Wildlife: Some of the special status wildlife species that have been documented nearby and which very likely reside in this area or use it as foraging habitat are:

- Mohave ground squirrel (the unit falls within a Mohave Ground Squirrel Conservation Area)
- LeConte's Thrasher
- Golden Eagle
- Various hawk species (Redtail hawk and others)
- Various bat species that are designated BLM sensitive Animal Species, including the spotted bat (*Euderma maculatum*), pallid bat (*Antrozous pallidus*), small-footed Myotis (*Myotis ciliolabrum*), and Yuma Myotis (*Myotis yumanensis*). These 4 species have been documented in the general area and are in the CNDDDB database. They may forage for insects in the desert wash systems here.

Other more common desert wildlife species that use the area are Bell's sparrow (formerly sage sparrow), cactus wren, black-throated sparrow, verdin, hummingbird species, white-crowned sparrow, and horned lark. The burrowing owl is likely to occur here in years of adequate precipitation when invertebrate and rodent prey is plentiful. Migrating neotropical warblers and other migrants pass through the area in fall and spring. Mammal species that most likely occur here are kit fox, badger, coyote, black-tailed jackrabbit, desert cottontail, and various rodent species. A variety of lizard and snake species also reside in this area. The area also supports a diversity of arthropods and insects, including migrating butterfly species and unusual dune beetles.

Proposed Olancha Greasewood Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC):

WIU 131-5 is contiguous with the proposed Olancha Greasewood ACEC, which is being created to conserve unusual biological resources. The sand dune hummocks in the area create habitat for an unusual plant assemblage described in the California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA) Plan as a Great Basin Enclave with greasewood (*Sarcobatus vermiculatus*) as the dominant plant. The goals of the proposed Olancha Greasewood ACEC are to conserve this unusual plant assemblage and its associated wildlife community, as well as the cultural values of greasewood. This greasewood community is unique because it is growing on tall sand dune hummocks, which are unusual features in this region. Greasewood is a deciduous shrub growing to 0.5-3 m tall with spiny branches and succulent leaves. Its leaves are bright green, in contrast to the grey-green color of most of the other shrubs within its range. Greasewood is a halophyte, tolerant of alkaline and saline soil conditions. Native Americans used the hard, yellow wood as firewood and ate the seeds and succulent leaves. The plant provides shade and resting sites for small mammals and birds. A variety of desert wildlife is associated with this greasewood community that has established on the sand dune hummocks.

Cultural Resources:

A great amount of detail about cultural resources is known within this unit. About a dozen cultural surveys were done in the 1970's with respect to permitted OHV events. These surveys discovered several dozen prehistoric and/or historic sites within the general area.