

Appendix G. Assessment of Wilderness Characteristics in Headwaters Forest Reserve

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Introduction

As required in Sections 201 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA), the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is required to conduct an assessment of resources on public lands including wilderness characteristics. As a part of this resource management plan, BLM documented the presence or absence of wilderness character and alternatives for the management of those lands. This appendix describes the wilderness character assessment.

Wilderness Characteristics Assessment Process

Public lands with wilderness characteristics generally:

- have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable;
- present outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation;
- include at least five thousand acres of land or are of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in unimpaired condition; and
- may have ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value (i.e. supplemental wilderness values).

In addition, lands recognized as having wilderness characteristics should be "... an area where the earth and community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain..." and "... an area of undeveloped 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 character..." (Wilderness Act of 1964, 16 USC 1131). Generally these lands do not allow for commercial enterprises, roads, motor vehicles, motorized equipment, motorboats, aircraft, mechanical transport, and structures or installations. In the assessment the presence of any of these uses in the Reserve was assessed, as was prohibition of any of them implied by the proposed plan.

To simplify the assessment, BLM first assessed which areas in the Headwaters Reserve were traversed by roads since, by definition, lands with wilderness character generally do not have roads. A road is defined through the Congressional Record as "... improved and maintained by mechanical means to ensure relatively regular and continuous use ..."

Four currently-used roads were identified within the Reserve. These roads divide the Reserve into five separate roadless tracts. These roadless tracts were subsequently evaluated to determine the value of their wilderness character (i.e. size, naturalness, outstanding opportunity for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation, and supplemental values). As a part of the evaluation the Bureau also assessed land ownership, location, topography, vegetation, and major human uses/activities.

A permanent documentation file of the FLMPA Section 201 assessment is available for public review at the Arcata Field Office. The file includes color photographs illustrating unusual characteristics of the area, the boundary roads, topographic and vegetative features, recreational attractions, human impacts, development and facilities, and supplemental values. A large-scale map delineates the location of the impacts, wilderness characteristics, and location of photos.

Summary of Wilderness Assessment

Size

Four of the five roadless tracts do not meet the size criteria. They range in size from 10 to 275 acres. In addition, all four tracts show very little sign of being in a natural condition because they have been heavily influenced by human activities. These tracts do not have wilderness characteristics.

The fifth roadless tract comprises approximately 6,985 acres. Approximately 1,110 acres near the border of the tract has been extensively disturbed by past timber harvesting and construction of roads, log landings, skid trails, and stream crossings. These actions created an unnatural appearance, and the lands were eliminated from further consideration. Therefore the fifth tract was reduced to 5,885 acres.

As a result of the condition analysis, only the fifth tract meets the size criteria. The others were not considered any further in the assessment because they do not meet the initial size criteria.

Naturalness

The 5,885-acre tract appears affected primarily by the forces of nature alone, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable. It has two distinct areas, however: a 3,100 acre unharvested redwood forest and a 2,785 acre harvested forest. The unharvested forest has a rugged topography with a primeval environment that is preserved in its natural condition. Since there are few signs of human imprints it unquestionably meets the naturalness criteria.

The 2,785-acre harvested area has been impacted by past human activities. But most of that past activity is not readily apparent to the average visitor, and the area would meet the naturalness criteria. However, there are three distinct areas within this harvested forest that have varying degree of naturalness, which are described follows:

- Approximately 200 acres in the southwestern portion of tract in Sections 17, 18, and 20, and a 40-acre parcel located at the end of the existing Elk River Trail in Section 9, are clearcut areas and show no sign of naturalness. They were tractor-logged, and many logging routes and skid trails are highly visible. These two areas are termed “shrub-sapling harvested” in the vegetation inventory (Chapter 3). At least 20 years are required before trees will grow large enough to make these two areas appear to be in a somewhat natural condition to the common visitor.
- Two areas totaling approximately 1,300 acres have been impacted by timber harvest activities. They appear in a more natural condition than the shrub-sapling harvested areas. The trees that remain after logging, and the new trees that have had time to grow, have created a semi-natural appearance. These areas are located in the southern portion of the tract in Sections 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 27, and 28. These areas are termed “pole-harvested” and were logged in the mid-1980’s.
- The remaining timber harvest area totals approximately 1,000 acres and appears in a natural condition. Most of this land is located in the northern portion of the tract in Sections 5, 8, and 9. These areas were logged more than 20 years ago, and the landscape has evolved to a natural condition.

Outstanding Opportunities for Solitude or a Primitive and Unconfined Form of Recreation

The 5,885-acre roadless tract provides visitors outstanding opportunities for solitude. The degree of solitude is highest in the large stands of the old-growth redwood, where the dense vegetation and rugged topography provide excellent visual screening. Solitude is less in the harvested areas, particularly in the more recent clearcuts. Outside sights and sounds are present when adjacent landowners are harvesting timber on their private property. Heavy mechanical equipment and chainsaws can be heard for at least two miles. Low-flying helicopters can be seen and heard when helicopter logging operations are occurring. These types of activities occur predominantly during the summer and early fall.

Day-use hiking and bird-watching are currently the primary recreational activities in the area. The Reserve is nationally renowned for its unique old-growth redwood ecosystem. Visitors can experience this unique resource by way of the Elk River and Salmon Creek Trails. The sights of the majestic old-growth redwood forest, as well as bird-watching and other wildlife viewing, are outstanding. The area therefore meets the criteria as having an outstanding opportunity for a primitive and unconfined recreation experience.

Supplemental Wilderness Values

This tract has outstanding supplemental wilderness values. The most outstanding ecological value is the unique, old-growth redwood forest and it’s the abundance and diversity of plants and animal species that depend on this forest. It is important habitat for threatened animal species including the marbled murrelet, northern spotted owl, coho salmon, Chinook salmon, and steelhead. It contains unique scientific and educational values because of the opportunities available to study an undisturbed old-growth redwood forest. Numerous archeological sites and a historic trail are also present.

Assessment of Managing Lands Having Wilderness Character

The 5,885-acre tract having wilderness characteristics was further evaluated by considering other resource values and uses and BLM's ability to protect and manage the area's wilderness characteristics.

It is concluded that the tract can be effectively managed to preserve its wilderness characteristics and to ensure continuation of its current uses and multiple resource benefits. Expected uses and activities outlined in the plan are consistent with such preservation and use. These management actions include watershed restoration (the removal of past logging roads and recontouring of slopes to natural topography), scientific research, resource monitoring, and a variety of low impact recreation activities. Allowed recreation uses are consistent with fostering education and interpretation of unique biological resources and maintaining ecological integrity, and are supportable with minimal facilities. Resource values, such as threatened or endangered plants and animals, fisheries, and wildlife, would be enhanced by management that protects wilderness characteristics. BLM has no plans to allow for timber harvesting; removal of forest fiber products; timber stand conversion; grazing operations; mining operations; issuance of new right-of-ways or oil, gas, geothermal, and mineral leases; prescribed burning; and recreation activities such as off-highway vehicle use, fishing, and hunting.

Nearly the entire surface and sub-surface is federally owned. However, one parcel is encumbered with private subsurface rights. This exception could limit BLM's ability to preserve the area's wilderness characteristics, if the surface was impacted by human disturbances. It is BLM's intent to acquire these subsurface rights, which would eliminate this conflict. The State of California has obtained a conservation easement over the entire Reserve, which complements management to preserve its wilderness characteristics.

Alternatives for Lands Having Wilderness Character

Based on management impacts, various land use allocations for the 5,885-acre tract were analyzed (i.e. the extent of the area that should be managed to maintain wilderness characteristics). Chapter 6, "Environmental Consequences (Environmental Effects and Alternative Comparisons)" describes the effects of such alternatives on the other management programs and activities under consideration. The alternatives considered are as follows:

- Alternative 7A involves management of 5,885-acres to protect wilderness characteristics. The alternative would include all of the 3,100 acre unharvested redwood forest and the 2,785 acre harvested forest
- Alternative 7B involves management to protect wilderness characteristics of all of the 3,100 acres of old-growth redwood forests and the mid-mature and early mature harvested areas (those areas generally appearing natural), totaling approximately 4,400 acres. The most heavily disturbed and unnatural-appearing areas would be excluded.
- Alternative 7C, the "No-Action" Alternative, would not involve management of any portion of tract to protect wilderness characteristics.