

FAQ SHEET
West Needles Wilderness Study Area
3/18/13

Q: How did Wilderness Study Areas come into existence?

A: As part of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA), the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) was directed to inventory the lands under its management, including inventorying for wilderness characteristics.

Q: Is the West Needles area a Wilderness Study Area?

A: Yes, the West Needles area, located just east of Molas Pass, is a Wilderness Study Area (WSA):

It was identified in the BLM Intensive Wilderness Inventory Final Wilderness Study Area report (November 1980)(pages 172-175) and assigned a unique identifying number, CO-030-229A. On October 31 1983, Public Law 98-141 conveyed portions of the West Needles Contiguous WSA (and others) to the USFS and directed the continued study of the remaining portions per Section 603 of FLMPA. The 1991 Wilderness Study Report mentioned this WSA under the heading "Wilderness Study Areas Not Included in This Report" as *"remnants of study areas that were partially exchanged with the Forest Service in a boundary adjustment completed in 1983... (and)...studied cooperatively in the San Juan Forest Plan and have been included for release in the Forest Service draft legislation and previously introduced legislation."*

Q: The 1991 Report says the West Needles Contiguous WSA is 'not recommended'. What does that mean?

A: The BLM, in its report to the President, provided recommendations as to whether a WSA should be managed as wilderness. An entire WSA may be recommended for management as wilderness, not recommended for management as wilderness, or portions of a WSA may be recommended for management as wilderness. Regardless of this recommendation, however, all portions of a WSA are managed in the same manner; so as not to impair the suitability of such areas for preservation as wilderness. This report still refers to the West Needles Contiguous area as a WSA.

Q: Was this WSA 'released' by Congress when portions of the original WSA were incorporated into the Weminuche Wilderness Area?

A: No. Portions of this WSA were transferred to the Forest Service and then incorporated into the Weminuche WSA by Congress via the 1993 Colorado Wilderness Act, but the remaining BLM lands were never released by Congress.

Q: How does the BLM manage the West Needles Contiguous WSA?

A: *BLM Manual 6330 provides management guidance for WSAs:*

“During the period of review of such areas and until Congress has determined otherwise, the Secretary shall continue to manage such lands according to his authority under this Act and other applicable law in a manner so as not to impair the suitability of such areas for preservation as wilderness.”

The BLM’s management policy is to...continue resource uses on lands designated as WSAs in a manner that maintains the area’s suitability for preservation as wilderness. The BLM’s policy will protect the wilderness characteristics of all WSAs in the same or better condition than they were on October 21, 1976 (or for Section 202 WSAs not reported to Congress, the date the WSA was designated), until Congress determines whether or not they should be designated as wilderness. When managers are in doubt as to a course of action in a WSA, this should serve as a guiding principle.

BLM should take appropriate action so as not to allow the discretionary activity to rise to a level that would create an expectation of continued use, thereby impairing the suitability of the WSA for designation as wilderness.

Uses, activities, or facilities that create a demand for uses that would be incompatible with wilderness management also do not meet the definition of temporary.

Q: Even if snowmobiles cannot be allowed per the 2012 BLM 6330 manual, the Special Recreation Permits and general snowmobile use, date back several years. Aren’t they pre-existing uses and ‘grandfathered in’?

A: As mentioned above, the BLM’s policy will protect the wilderness characteristics of all WSAs in the same or better condition than they were on October 21, 1976, until Congress determines whether or not they should be designated as wilderness.

Q: Is there any other guidance for snowmobile use in the Silverton Area?

A: Yes, there are two other guidance documents in place for these lands; the 1985 San Juan/San Miguel Resource Management Plan (RMP) and the 2010 Alpine Triangle Recreation Area Management Plan (RAMP). The development of both of these documents included public involvement.

An RMP is the planning level document which allocates use of public lands, including designations of Open, Limited, or Closed to motorized travel. The 1985 San Juan/San Miguel RMP identifies the Silverton SRMA as ‘Limited to Designated Roads and Trails.’

The 2010 Alpine Triangle RAMP also refers to the Silverton area as ‘Limited to Designated Roads’ (allowing for additions or subtractions to the designated system per section 2.1.6). The only route identified in this plan is the Colorado Trail (non-motorized). It further states that snowmobile use is not allowed in designated Wilderness or WSAs (section 2.1.5), and that WSAs are ‘closed to travel’ (section 2.1.6).

Q: What options is the BLM exploring for snowmobile use in the Silverton Area?

A: Unless released by Congress, the BLM must manage the unit as described in Manual 6330. The BLM is working with the USFS, Silverton Snowmobile Club, and Colorado Snowmobile Association to identify opportunities outside of the WSA. The creation of this FAQ sheet is the first step in that process as the BLM has committed to thoroughly researching the background of this WSA to determine its designation and management status.

Q: Who can we contact for more information?

A: The Outdoor Recreation Planner for the BLM Tres Rios office is Jeff Christenson, 970-882-6811, jchristenson@blm.gov. The Field Office Manager is Connie Clementson, 970-882-6808, cclementson@blm.gov.