UNCOMPAHGRE PLANNING AREA WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS INVENTORY: 2015 UPDATE

INTRODUCTION

As part of the land use planning process for the Uncompahgre Resource Management Plan (RMP), the BLM assessed public lands within the Uncompahgre RMP Planning Area (planning area) to determine whether wilderness characteristics are present outside of designated wilderness, existing wilderness study areas (WSAs), and the congressionally-designated Tabeguache Area. The BLM reviewed original 1980 wilderness inventories, as well as lands proposed by BLM staff and the public, in order to identify lands with potential wilderness characteristics.

Of the eight areas identified through the review, seven were found to possess wilderness characteristics. The BLM developed a range of RMP alternatives and analyzed impacts associated with the various management prescriptions designed to protect these characteristics. Decisions could protect all, some (including portions of some), or none of the identified lands.

BLM Authority and the Land Use Planning Process

Land use plans identify broad-scale decisions to guide future land management actions and subsequent site-specific implementation decisions. The BLM Land Use Planning Handbook (1601-1) provides guidance to BLM employees for implementing BLM land use planning requirements. In addition, Appendix C, Section 1.K of BLM Handbook 1610-1 (Wilderness Characteristics) directs BLM field offices to identify decisions to protect or preserve wilderness characteristics (including sufficient size, naturalness, and outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation). Specific guidance for inventorying wilderness characteristics is provided through BLM Manual Section 6310, "Conducting Wilderness Characteristics Inventory on BLM Lands." Guidance for "considering wilderness characteristics in the BLM land use planning process" is provided through BLM Manual Section 6320.

While BLM authority to conduct wilderness reviews and establish new wilderness study areas under FLPMA Section 603 expired in 1993, the BLM has authority under FLPMA sections 102

and 201 to maintain a current inventory of all public lands and their resources, including wilderness characteristics. Through the land use planning process, the BLM must consider all available information to determine the mix of resource use and protection that best serves the FLPMA multiple-use mandate.

The management of areas found to possess wilderness characteristics is addressed through the development of a range of RMP alternatives. Within each alternative, the BLM identifies appropriate portions of land and develops effective management strategies (including management prescriptions, stipulations, and allowable uses).

The five existing WSAs within the planning area will continue to be managed to protect their wilderness characteristics under the policy detailed in BLM Manual Section 6330 until Congress designates them as wilderness or releases them for other uses.

Scope of Assessment

The BLM considered and evaluated wilderness characteristics for all BLM lands within the planning area outside of existing WSAs and the Tabeguache Area. The assessment did not include national forest lands or BLM lands within the Gunnison Gorge or Dominguez-Escalante national conservation areas.

FLPMA requires that the BLM maintain a current inventory of conditions and resources on public lands, including wilderness characteristics. The last inventory of wilderness characteristics was completed more than thirty years prior to this RMP revision. This update of the UFO wilderness characteristics inventory takes into consideration the possibility that conditions on the ground may have changed during this interval.

In performing this assessment, the UFO:

1) Reviewed the 1980 BLM Intensive Wilderness Inventory and updated information when necessary to ensure that information was current and accurate.

2) Reviewed proposals to inventory and protect BLM lands with wilderness characteristics submitted by BLM staff and the public.

3) Assessed potential lands in the planning area identified through BLM staff and public wilderness proposals or acquired since the 1980 inventory.

WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

BLM Manual 6310-1 defines wilderness characteristics as consisting of: 1) sufficient size, 2) naturalness, 3) outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation, and 4) supplemental values. To have wilderness characteristics, an area must meet each of the first three criteria as described below.

Sufficient Size

The area is roadless and has over 5,000 acres of contiguous BLM lands, or is of sufficient size to make practicable its use in an unimpaired condition. Areas adjacent to wilderness areas or

WSAs that are less than 5,000 acres may have wilderness characteristics. State or private lands are not included in making this acreage determination.

Roadless Definitions

For purposes of conducting wilderness characteristics inventories, the BLM uses definitions found on page 17 of House Report 94-1163 (May 15, 1976), released prior to the enactment of FLPMA. In the report, roadless refers to:

> ...the absence of roads which have been improved and maintained by mechanical means to insure relatively regular and continuous use. A way maintained solely by the passage of vehicles does not constitute a road.

The BLM adopted the following sub-definitions of words and phrases related to roads:

- Improved and maintained: Actions taken physically by people to keep the road open to vehicle traffic. "Improved" does not necessarily mean formal construction. "Maintained" does not necessarily mean annual maintenance.
- Mechanical means: Use of hand or power machinery or tools.
- Relatively regular and continuous use: Vehicular use that has occurred and will continue to occur on a relatively regular basis. Examples are: access roads for equipment to maintain a stock water tank or other established water sources, which may entail lengthy return intervals for this purpose; access roads to maintained recreation sites or facilities; or access roads to mining claims.

A route established or maintained solely by the passage of vehicles would not be considered a road, even if it is used on a relatively regular and continuous basis. Vehicle routes constructed by mechanical means but that are no longer being maintained by mechanical methods are not roads. Sole use of hands and feet to move rocks or dirt without the use of tools or machinery does not meet the definition of "mechanical means." Roads need not be "maintained" on a regular basis but rather "maintained" when road conditions warrant actions to keep it in a usable condition. A dead-end (cherry-stem) road can form the boundary of an inventory area and does not by itself disqualify an area from being considered "roadless."

Naturalness

Lands and resources exhibit a high degree of naturalness when affected primarily by the forces of nature and where the imprint of human activity is substantially unnoticeable (BLM Manual Section 6320).

The naturalness of an area may be influenced by the presence or absence of roads and trails, fences or other developments; the nature and extent of landscape modifications; the presence of native vegetation communities; and the connectivity of habitats. The presence and diversity of wildlife species are recognized as an indicator of naturalness.

Examples of human-made features that may be considered substantially unnoticeable in certain cases are: trails, trail signs, bridges, fire towers, fire breaks, fire pre-suppression facilities, pit toilets, fisheries enhancement facilities, fire rings, hitching posts, snow gauges, water quantity and

quality measuring devices, research monitoring markers and devices, radio repeater sites, air quality monitoring devices, fencing, spring developments, overgrown and barely visible two-track ways, and small reservoirs.

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

Solitude

Visitors may have outstanding opportunities for solitude when the sights, sounds, and evidence of other people are rare or infrequent, or where visitors can feel isolated, alone or secluded from others.

Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

Visitors may have outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined types of recreation where the use of the area is through non-motorized, non-mechanical means, and where no or minimal developed recreation facilities are encountered.

Supplemental Values

The area may contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.

Supplemental values may be present within the inventory units but are not a required component of wilderness character; they will be described but not used as a mechanism to impact a final finding.

ASSESSMENT PROCESS

In accordance with BLM policy outlined in BLM Manual Section 6310, the BLM assessment team:

- Analyzed GIS data to identify blocks of BLM land (1) greater than 5,000 acres or adjacent to a WSA, designated wilderness, or the Tabeguache Area and (2) that do not contain improved and maintained BLM roads, county roads, or highways (wilderness inventory roads).
- Assessed BLM 2013 one-meter aerial imagery and DigitalGlobe World Imagery (30 cm) to eliminate blocks of land that clearly lack wilderness characteristics of naturalness. The most common features indicating a lack of naturalness included obvious vegetative manipulations (such as chaining and rollerchopping) and distinct roads, dams, ditches, seismic exploration lines, and contour furrows.
- Consulted with field staff familiar with assessment areas to elicit additional information and substantiate findings regarding areas eliminated from consideration.
- Conducted field visits in order to verify preliminary findings and complete inventories for qualifying areas.

Assessment Tools

The BLM assessment team utilized the following tools in evaluating areas for consideration and in completing the wilderness characteristics assessment:

Past Wilderness Inventories

The BLM reviewed the 1980 BLM Intensive Wilderness Inventory, Final Wilderness Study Areas report and maps for areas that had been assessed for the presence of wilderness characteristics, but were not included within a WSA. Because the original report documentation was not available, all aspects of an area were considered in this assessment, making it more comprehensive than a simple update.

This review enabled the BLM to determine whether any new information is available that was not considered as part of the original inventories. As the larger landscape experiences population growth and increased development, perceptions regarding what constitutes solitude and outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation change. Interest in arid and low elevation environments has also increased. Therefore, some information related to social values submitted by the public was considered "new information" based on changed physical conditions of the land and social perceptions of wilderness characteristics that may have occurred over time.

Public Wilderness Proposals

External groups advocate for wilderness designation through legislation and participation in the land use planning process. The BLM considered (in 2010) the most recent proposal for protection of wilderness characteristics submitted by the Colorado Wilderness Network. This coalition is made up of national and statewide organizations (including the Colorado Environmental Coalition, Colorado Mountain Club, Environment Colorado, Sierra Club, The Wilderness Society, and Western Colorado Congress), as well as local citizens groups (including the Central Colorado Wilderness Coalition, High Country Citizens Alliance, Ridgway-Ouray Community Council, San Juan Citizens Alliance, Sheep Mountain Alliance, Wild Connections, and Wilderness Workshop).

In 2013 The Wilderness Society suggested other polygons that may possess wilderness characteristics. They provided basic maps, a shapefile for use in GIS, and a table of suggested areas. The BLM carefully reviewed these areas. The result was the addition of two units that were not included in the 2011 update to the UFO wilderness characteristics inventory: the Adobe Badlands WSA Adjacent Unit and the Lower Tabeguache-Campbell Creek Unit. Both units are included in this inventory update.

Other Documents and Data

The following information sources were considered in drafting the assessment:

- Field investigation notes
- Range improvement records (UFO Range Management Specialist and GIS)
- Colorado Natural Heritage Program databases (including potential conservation areas, rare plants, natural plant communities, raptors, and bats)
- Colorado Wilderness Network proposed wilderness GIS data layer (2007)
- Map and correspondence from The Wilderness Society (11/21/2013)
- BLM LR2000 databases (including rights-of-way, mining claims, and oil and gas leasing)

- Dry Creek Travel Management Plan (2009)
- UFO Travel Management Plan (2010)
- UFO road maintenance records
- UFO range allotment management records
- UFO cultural database
- UFO oil and gas lease GIS data sets
- UFO travel and transportation GIS data sets

ASSESSMENT AREAS

The wilderness characteristics assessment describes known valid existing rights, grandfathered uses, and public land investments within the survey areas. BLM staff verified new information during field surveys.

Table 1 on page 6 identifies the planning area lands detailed within this assessment.

Table 1
Planning Area Lands Assessed for Wilderness Characteristics

Name	Total Inventoried Acreage*	Acreage with Wilderness Characteristics	Acreage without Wilderness Characteristics
Camel Back WSA Adjacent	8,700	6,950	1,750
Adobe Badlands WSA Adjacent	16,520	6,180	10,340
Lower Tabeguache/Campbell Creek	11,200	11,060	140
Dolores River Canyon WSA Adjacent	32,650	550	32,100
Dry Creek Basin	16,890	7,030	9,850
Roc Creek	7,650	5,480	2,170
Shavano Creek	6,100	4,900	1,200
Norwood Canyon	5,600	0	5,600

*Reflects total BLM acreage within the planning area submitted by the Colorado Wilderness Network, including acreage within existing WSAs. Acreages generated through GIS mapping may vary due to rounding inconsistencies and different mapping techniques.