

BUFFALO HILLS WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 46,143 acres

The Buffalo Hills WSA (CA-020-619) is located primarily in Washoe County, Nevada (45,287 acres), with a small portion, in Lassen County, California (856 acres). The WSA contains 46,143 acres of public land and 1,293 acres of private land located in 10 parcels ranging in size from 40 to 800 acres.

Beginning on the southeast side of the WSA and progressing counter-clockwise, the boundaries consist of:

The west side of Buffalo Creek Ranch private property, the north fork of Buffalo Creek Road to approximately the center of Section 25, T.35N., R.19E., and then west and north along a prominent rim in Sections 25 and 26, then roughly north to the Buckhorn road, an all-weather gravel road; on the north, the boundary follows the Buckhorn Road westward to a prominent rim east of Burnt Lake, where it then extends southward to the Cal Neva/Tuledad fence, then extends westward along a dirt road and the bladed fenceline road to a point near Sidehill Spring. From this point the boundary follows legal lines and an access way to the west boundary to avoid an unnatural area to the north that is laced with numerous roads and ways. The western boundary follows a rough dirt road, the Pilgrim Lake to Painter Flat Road, to its intersection with private land on the southern boundary. The south boundary extends around private land and then follows a rough dirt road from Painter Flat to Buffalo Meadows Ranch.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE - 0 acres recommended for wilderness
46,143 acres recommended for nonwilderness
The recommendation for this WSA is to release all 46,143 acres for uses other than wilderness. There are 856 acres within California and the 45,287 acres in Nevada that are recommended for uses other than wilderness. The main reason the Buffalo Hills WSA is recommended for use other than wilderness is because its wilderness qualities, while present, do not distinguish the WSA from much of the surrounding area. By not designating this WSA as wilderness, it would remain open and available for antelope, chukar, and deer hunting, dependent, to a large extent, upon motorized access to hunting areas within the WSA. The Buffalo Hills WSA is a popular hunting area in Washoe County, Nevada, providing an estimated 3,500 hunter days annually from August through December. There are approximately 26 miles of routes of travel including primitive ways, washes and other unmaintained routes of access which will be available for vehicle use. Wilderness designation of much of the WSA would eliminate the vehicle accessibility and would preclude much of this popular public use of the WSA. Manageability was a secondary factor in the nonwilderness recommendation. Management of the WSA as wilderness would be complicated by three large blocks of private land located throughout the central portion of this broad open WSA. These lands have potential for recreational development associated with hunting (camps, cabins, road access). In addition, Hole-in-the-Ground and the Norton Place have been farmed in past years and could be the site of future farming operations.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The Buffalo Hills WSA is predominantly natural with human imprints unnoticeable in the area as a whole. Dominant vegetation is sagebrush with associated shrubs and grasses and scattered juniper. Manmade features within the WSA are livestock management facilities (10 stock ponds of 1 acre or less, 5 developed springs and 9 miles of fence) and motor vehicle access ways (26 miles). All of the livestock facilities are low profile and are not readily noticeable beyond 1/3 mile of each facility. The 26 miles of 2 access ways are located in canyons as well as open country. While cross country travel during hunting season does occur off some of the ways, the very rocky surface of the WSA limits extensive development of new ways. Overall effect on naturalness is slight.

B. Solitude: The WSA offers good opportunities for solitude throughout the majority of the year. In spite of the WSA's relatively flat terrain, its large size, small rims, and shallow canyons provide many isolated areas that offer opportunities for solitude. Juniper scattered throughout the northern half of the WSA also add screening to help isolate visitors.

From mid-August through the end of December solitude within the WSA is disrupted by hunters and their vehicles. The Buffalo Hills WSA is a popular antelope, deer, and game bird hunting area in Washoe County. Hunters drive virtually all of the access ways within the WSA and in some areas drive cross country in search of good hunting areas. The WSA is periodically overflown by military aircraft which create temporary effects on solitude.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: Opportunities for primitive and unconfined types of recreation exist throughout the WSA. The WSA is comprised of broad, open slopes and low hills of little interest for backpacking or challenging exploration. Features of topographic interest are limited to Hole-in-the-Ground, a shallow 200' deep one-mile-wide caldera, and the canyons of the west, middle and north forks of Buffalo Creek. Hole-in-the-Ground, although appearing intriguing by its name is not a distinctive feature when actually visited on-site. The canyons of Buffalo Creek afford opportunities for exploration. Activities that occur with very low frequency are hiking, wildlife observation, nature study and geological sightseeing.

D. Special Features: The WSA does not contain any special features.

4. MANAGEABILITY

The WSA is manageable as wilderness, however, management of the area to preserve wilderness values on public land may be adversely affected by development of private lands located within the WSA. Private inholdings comprise half of Hole-in-the-Ground caldera and together with adjacent holdings total 760 acres.

The Norton Place, 320 acres of private land, technically outside the WSA because it is at the end of a cherry stemmed road, is situated in open country at the head of the middle fork of Buffalo Creek and is surrounded by public lands. Private land (200 acres), in the

center of Antelope Basin dominates this area popular for hunting use. These lands have potential for recreational use as hunter camps, hunting cabin development and hay production.

Management to maintain the non-motorized characteristics of wilderness would be difficult. Open terrain along the north, west and south boundaries precludes physical control of vehicle entry. The only regular public use of this area in the past has been by hunters who rely on four-wheel drive vehicles to access popular hunting areas. Nine miles of cherry-stemmed roads and 26 miles of ways within the WSA would require closure and field presence to enforce the closure.

Management and coordination of military overflights will be a consideration.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

The geology and mineralization of the Buffalo Hills is described in the Unit Resource Analysis (URA) based on data in the Mineral Resource Inventory (MRI) files of the BLM Cal-Neva Planning Unit. The potential for oil and gas is unknown. The WSA is not considered valuable for geothermal or sodium.

The WSA has no history or visible evidence of activities with respect to locatable minerals. There are no known mining claims in the WSA. There has been no known development of saleable minerals in the WSA. There are no oil or gas leases held within the WSA.

In 1982, Barringer Resource Inc. conducted a geochemical and geostatistic evaluation of WSA's within the BLM Winnemucca District included analysis of the Buffalo Hills WSA. The Barringer Report indicates a low favorability for accumulation of mineral resources in the Buffalo Hills WSA.

No U.S. Geological Survey or U.S. Bureau of Mines mineral surveys were conducted in this WSA.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC PUBLIC COMMENTS

The Eagle Lake-Cedarville Wilderness EIS that included the Buffalo Hills WSA, the Susanville District Advisory Council identified the following interested groups and resources to be represented on an eight-member Technical Review Team (TRT): livestock-adjacent land owners; wildlife-agencies-sportsmen; wilderness-environmental-dispersed recreation; minerals-energy-utilities; wild horses; motorized recreation, cultural-historical, archaeological; BLM. The team's recommendation of nonsuitable was supported by the Susanville District Advisory Council and by BLM and is the recommended action for this WSA.

Issues analyzed by the TRT and in the EIS were: a wilderness complex where five adjacent WSA's separated only by boundary roads including Buffalo Hills WSA would be managed as a wilderness complex inclusive of the road; the quality of the wilderness resource and how much was appropriate to be preserved and managed as wilderness;

concern that wilderness would prevent mineral development, livestock management activities and motorized recreation access for hunting; and concern that wilderness would limit management of wild horses and burro populations.

306 comments were received that addressed this WSA specifically or as part of general comments on all WSA's in the draft EIS. Of the 306 comments received, 11 were oral comments received at public hearings held in Cedarville and Susanville, California and in Reno, Nevada. The remaining 295 comments received were written. 32 respondents supported all wilderness, 263 supported no wilderness recommended by BLM and one supported partial-wilderness. Ten respondents supported more wilderness than was addressed in the draft EIS.

Those favoring wilderness cited the area's natural character, opportunities for primitive recreation, opportunities for solitude and geological value of Hole-in-the-Ground within the WSA. Inclusion of the area in the national wilderness preservation system as a representative of volcanic land forms in the desert shrub ecosystem was also cited. Those opposed to wilderness cited concern that despite livestock's grandfathered uses in the wilderness act, livestock management activities, particularly motorized access for water facility inspection, maintenance and sheep camp movement would be restricted. Restrictions on or prohibition of development of new springs and reservoirs, was also cited as reasons for opposition to wilderness. Others opposed to wilderness cited the elimination of mineral development in designated wilderness as a reason without reference to specific mineral values within the WSA.

The following local and state agencies supported the BLM no-wilderness alternative: Lassen County, (California) Board of Supervisors; Nevada County, (California) Supervisor Joel Gustafson; The State of Nevada through the Nevada Clearinghouse; The Nevada Division of State Parks; The Nevada Department of Minerals; The California Department of Fish and Game.