

SELENITE MOUNTAINS WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 32,041 acres

The Selenite Mountains WSA (NV-020-200) is located in western Pershing County, with a small portion in eastern Washoe County, Nevada. It is about 2 miles southeast of Gerlach and a 2 hour drive from Reno. The WSA includes 32,041 acres of public land and surrounds 167 acres of private land. The study area is bounded on the west by a combination of State Route 34 and low grade roads, on the north by State Route 49 (the High Road), on the east by mining associated roads and private lands, and to the south by a road and section lines.

The Selenite Mountains WSA runs approximately 13 miles north-south and between 3 and 5 miles east-west. It straddles the north end of the Selenite Range, a north-south range flanked by alluvial desert basins. There are no known riparian areas although there are some small juniper stands. The elevation ranges from 3,980 feet to 7,115 feet. Three distinct landforms can be found: the main ridge axis, the narrow fringing desert piedmont on the northwest side and the footslope on the southeast side.

The main ridge is predominantly eroded granite and basaltic flows, with several dominant drainage systems on the west and northwest sides running perpendicular to the ridge axis. The landform is mostly rolling with a few steep granitic rock outcrops and cliff areas. There are noticeable wave-cut terraces from Pleistocene Lake Lahontan on the northwest side.

The fringing desert piedmont on the northwest side is an abrupt transition from the steeper ridge axis. It is characterized by conical alluvial fans and roughly parallel drainages.

The footslope on the southeast side is similar to the main ridge axis except that it is less steep and has a lower elevation. This section drops slowly from the main ridge to the desert valley in the east. There are numerous shallow parallel drainages, and the terrain is predominantly rolling to flat with a few scattered granitic rock outcrops.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE

The recommendation for this WSA is to release all 32,041 acres for uses other than wilderness. While the wilderness values met the criteria for wilderness study, the WSA was recommended for uses other than wilderness due to potentially moderate (25% of WSA) to high (25% of WSA) geothermal values, moderate mineral values (40% of WSA) and significant outside sights and sounds.

It is conjectured that short term metallic mineral interest within the WSA is likely. This interest would result in exploration that would incorporate cross-country travel, 2 miles of drill roads, drill pads, dozer trenches and dozer cuts. Proposed geothermal actions are increasing in the surrounding area. These actions would result in the eventual development of one 10-megawatt geothermal power plant with associated well pads, access roads, powerlines, pipelines, cross country travel and powerplant structures.

A major gypsum mine is adjacent to the study area and its operation detracts significantly from the naturalness and solitude of the WSA. Dust and noise caused by the excavation of materials, coupled with large trucks hauling the material to the plant located in the small town of Empire and the plant operations all combine to reduce the area's wilderness qualities.

In summary, because of the moderate mineral potential, the high geothermal potential, and the significant outside sights and sounds, the recommendation for this WSA is to provide for access to potential mineral resources and to not manage it as wilderness.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The Selenite Mountain WSA is considered primarily natural. The study area straddles the north end of the Selenite Range, a north-south mountain range flanked by alluvial desert basins. There are three types of landforms: the main ridge axis, the narrow fringing desert piedmont on the northwest side and the footslope on the southeast side. The one grazing allotment present includes a corral in the center of the WSA. A number of parallel drainages are present, as well as thirteen ways (9.8 miles) in the study area. The State of Nevada has a free-use-permit for a gravel pit on the west edge. There is one small prospect area along the northwest boundary road. This is within the study area.

A number of developments on the outside of the WSA definitely impact the naturalness. The Western Pacific Railway runs near the northern boundary and is visible and audible up to the main ridge axis. The communities of Gerlach and Empire and the Empire Gypsum Mine and Plant may be seen from a number of areas. Other outside impacts are minimal.

B. Solitude: Topographic and vegetative screening in most of this WSA is poor and, together with the WSA's outside sights and sounds, there is little opportunity for solitude on the periphery of the WSA. Opportunities for solitude are outstanding in some of the major drainages around Selenite Peak.

When the Initial and Intensive Inventories were conducted, the impacts of outside sights and sounds were not considered. However, when the final EIS Proposed Action Analysis was made, it was determined that the influence of the adjacent mining operation could not be ignored. The noise, the dust, the excavation and the work at the plant, all have an impact on the solitude of the WSA.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: This WSA offers outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation. The wave-cut terraces, rock hounding areas and outstanding views of the surrounding countryside are a few of the features that could draw people to this area. Day-hiking, camping, backpacking, hunting and horse-packing opportunities are considered outstanding, even though no water is available. The WSA is in the Selenite Range Herd Use Area and a small portion of the east side is in the Lava Beds Herd Use Area. Both wild horses and burros may be found.

D. Special Features: There are no significant special features.

4. MANAGEABILITY

The Selenite Mountains WSA is capable of being managed as wilderness. There could be manageability problems associated with the private inholdings (167 acres), since the BLM is required to provide reasonable access to inholding owners. Construction of access roads through the area would be an additional erosion of wilderness values.

There are also management concerns associated with 9.8 miles of ways, easy ORV accessibility on 14,000 acres (44% of WSA) and frequent military overflights.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

As a result of this information, the following conclusions were reached: 14,400 acres rated as having moderate metallic mineral potential (silver, molybdenum, tungsten), 8,400 acres rated as having high geothermal potential and 9,500 acres rated as having moderate geothermal potential. Some 960 acres of the Gerlach Known Geothermal Resource Area (KGRA) occur within the WSA. A small group of patented mining claims, presently inactive, are located in the northern end of the WSA. Little is known about mineralization or past activities on the patented claims. There is no present production of any mineral or geothermal resources in the study area. There are no mining claims and no acres under geothermal lease.

Geothermal exploration has subsided, compared to the past. However, proposed developments are increasing in the surrounding areas. This interest would result in the eventual development of one 10-megawatt powerplant with associated well pads, 1/2 mile of access roads, powerlines, pipelines and powerplant structures, disturbing 20 acres in the southwest side of the WSA. Geothermal exploration consisting of cross country travel, small drill sites and 1/2 miles of access roads, disturbing 10 acres would occur along the north and northeast side of the WSA.

In summary, quantities of various mineral and energy resources are unknown, but the potential for occurrence is moderate through 40% of the WSA and there is high potential for geothermal resources in one-fourth of the study area and moderate potential for another fourth.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC COMMENTS

During the initial and intensive inventory stages (1978-1980), many of the 21 comments that were received addressed characteristics of the area (e.g., intrusions, resources, wilderness qualities) or suggested boundary changes. Reasons given for supporting wilderness study area status were the following: opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation, special features and naturalness. Reasons given for opposing wilderness study area status were these: other resource values, roads, intrusions and lack of outstanding opportunities for solitude. These comments were addressed to the entire 56,320 acres of the original study area. About 24,000 acres have since been released from wilderness consideration.

During the 90-day comment period for the Draft Wilderness Environmental Impact Statement, three formal public hearings were held in Nevada (Gerlach on November 1, Winnemucca on November 3 and Reno on November 8, 1983.). No oral comments were received. Eleven written comments were received. Of them, three supported more wilderness than the draft EIS Proposed Action (no wilderness) and eight supported the Proposed Action. Some comments mentioned the roads and private property within the WSA as well as lack of water, solitude and recreational opportunities. Others wanted to preserve the wildlife, scenery and opportunities for primitive recreation.

Pershing County wants to preserve all public lands within the county's boundary's as multiple use areas. The Governor of the State of Nevada concurred with the Bureau's recommendation. The U.S. Air Force said it supported wilderness designation provided no restrictions were placed on military flights. It said it will work with the BLM if military flights create problems in some areas.

No comments were received on the Final EIS.