

CHINA MOUNTAIN WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 10,358 acres

The China Mountain WSA (NV-020-406P) is located in eastern Pershing County, about a 5 hour drive east of Reno, Nevada. The WSA includes 10,358 acres of public lands and surrounds 80 acres of private lands. The study area uses the Cherry Creek-Hoffman Creek road as its eastern boundary, skirting around some private lands and follows a road westwardly to the top of the ridge of the Tobin Range; it then proceeds north until it meets Cherry Creek Canyon, the northern boundary. It measures approximately 7 miles north-south and varies between 2 and 3 miles east-west. Private land creates a 1-mile indentation in the southeast.

The WSA is part of the east slope of the Tobin Range. The terrain has a high elevation plateau, steep cliffs and rolling hills on the east slope; elevations range from 5,060 to 8,842 feet. There are two main canyons within the mountain range and several smaller canyons. The vegetation is primarily sagebrush with some pinyon-juniper and riparian vegetation along the canyon bottoms.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE

The recommendation for this wilderness is to release all 10,358 acres for uses other than wilderness.

In this WSA, the mineral and geothermal potential outweigh the wilderness values. The WSA is recommended for uses other than wilderness due to 5,500 acres being rated high for metallic minerals (gold, silver, lead, zinc, copper, tungsten, mercury and antimony), all 10,358 acres rated being moderate for nonmetallic minerals (barite, limestone and dolomite) and 2,000 acres of land being rated moderate for geothermal steam. There are 232 acres of existing oil and gas leases and 500 acres of mining claims.

It is projected that short-term mineral interest is likely in the China Mountain WSA. This interest would result in a 300 acre (100 acres in WSA) open pit mine plus an additional 15 acres of disturbance caused by dozer trenches, cross-country travel and open cuts. There would also be 3 miles of drill roads.

Although geothermal exploration has been decreasing, proposed developments are increasing in the surrounding areas. Exploration consisting of cross-country travel, small drill sites and 1/2 mile of drill access road would disturb five acres. If other claims are developed, as they are likely to be, then the added noise and visual pollution would reduce the wilderness values by the creation of access roads, the development of a mining or geothermal operation and the actual extraction of an ore body.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The China Mountain WSA is predominantly natural with most of the WSA free of human imprints. The WSA is part of the east slope of the Tobin Range. The terrain has a high elevation plateau, steep cliffs and rolling hills on the east slope; elevations range from 5,060 to 8,842 feet. There are two main canyons within the mountain range and several smaller canyons.

Most of the range improvements, including developed springs, reservoirs, water troughs, a pipeline and a fence, are mainly near the borders. Three vehicle ways (1.8 miles) extend into the unit. The main impact of sight and sound comes from the mining area immediately to the north of the WSA.

B. Solitude: Opportunities for solitude are considered outstanding. Vegetative and topographic screening are excellent in the main canyons, and there is little to disturb the visitor. There is some localized and seasonal ranching activity and light traffic on the roads to the east of the WSA.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: Opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation are considered to be outstanding. Day-hiking, camping, backpacking, hunting, rock climbing and nature study are particularly noteworthy. The China Mountain plateau as well as Hoffman and Lee Canyons are exceptionally scenic. There is a fair fishery habitat for brown, cutthroat and rainbow trout in Hoffman Canyon. The China Mountain Herd Use Area encloses the WSA and offers an opportunity for those people who want to see wild horses.

D. Special Features: There are no special features in the WSA.

4. MANAGEABILITY

The study area is capable of being managed as wilderness. There will, however, be manageability problems associated with the following concerns: private inholdings (80 acres), pre-FLPMA mining claims (500 acres, 5% of the WSA), and oil and gas leases (232 acres, 2% of the WSA). If any of these parcels are developed, as the owners/possessors would have the legal right to do, intrusions created by mining, drilling or many other operations would seriously impact the wilderness values present. Reasonable access to allow the possessors of these claims and leases to reach these parcels would also have to be granted. This would involve new roads scarring up the countryside and the additional noise and dust caused by vehicles working in the area.

There would also be management problems associated with the ways (1.8 miles) that are present and the easy accessibility for ORVs (1,000 acres or 10 percent of WSA). The configuration of the 'V' shaped southeast corner and the difficulty of locating the western boundary (formed by topographic features) would also create management concerns. Individuals would want to create a 'short cut' across the 'V' shaped section, thus creating a new road or way.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

The following information was deduced: 5,500 acres of land rated high for metallic minerals (gold, silver, lead, zinc, copper, tungsten, mercury, and antimony), 10,358 acres rated moderate for nonmetallic minerals (barite, limestone and dolomite) and 2,000 acres of land rated as moderate for geothermal steam. The Iron Hat Mining District located on the northern boundary has been a past producer of silver, lead, copper, gold, antimony and tungsten.

Based on surrounding current and past metallic mineral exploration/development, short-term interest within the WSA is likely. This interest would result in the eventual development of a 300 acre (100 acres in WSA) open pit precious metal mine in the Iron Hat District. Precious metal exploration, consisting of cross-country travel, 2 miles of drill roads and pads, dozer trenches and open cuts disturbing five acres would occur in the Iron Hat District and 5 acres in Hoffman Canyon. Similar barite exploration disturbing five acres with a mile of drill road would occur in China Canyon.

Geothermal exploration has subsided compared to the past, however, proposed developments are increasing in the surrounding areas. This interest would result in geothermal exploration consisting of cross-country travel, drill sites and 1/2 mile of access roads disturbing five acres in the southeastern tip of the WSA. There are no existing leases.

In summary, quantities of various mineral and energy resources are unknown, but the potential for occurrence is from moderate to high throughout the WSA and the potential for geothermal steam is moderate for 20% of the area.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC COMMENTS

During the initial and intensive inventory stages (1978-1980) many of the 26 comments discussed characteristics of the general 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, naturalness and special features. Reasons given for opposing wilderness study area status were these: other resource values, roads, intrusions and lack of outstanding opportunity for solitude. This WSA was split from the original NV-020-406 (Tobin Range) area and these comments were addressed to the 115,000 acres of the original Tobin Range area.

During the 90 day comment period for the Draft Wilderness Environmental Impact Statement, three formal public meetings were held in Nevada (Gerlach on November 1, Winnemucca on November 3 and Reno on November 8, 1983). Of the eight oral comments received, all of them supported more wilderness than the Proposed Action (No Wilderness). Of the 59 written comments received, eight supported the Proposed Action and 51 supported more wilderness. Some people wrote about the need to preserve the WSA's naturalness, scenic quality, wildlife habitat and fishery.

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 supports wilderness designation provided no restrictions are placed on military flights. They said that they would work with the BLM if military flights create problems in some areas.

No comments have been received on the Winnemucca Final Wilderness Recommendations Environmental Impact Statement.