

# WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS REVIEW

Date of Submission: December 15, 2001; September 3, 2002

Proponent: Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA); Utah Wilderness Coalition (UWC)

Name of Area to be Reviewed: **White River Area**

Date(s) of Field Office Review: February 7, 2007

BLM Field Office(s) Affected: Vernal Field Office

## EVALUATION

1. Was new information submitted by a member of the public for this area?

a. YES: \_\_\_\_\_ NO:   X  

2. If new information was submitted, describe the submission. For example, did the submission include a map that identifies the specific boundaries of the area(s) in question; a narrative that describes the wilderness characteristics of the area and documents how that information differs from the information previously gathered and reviewed in the BLM inventories; photographic documentation; etc?

a. No new information has been submitted by a member of the public.

The BLM Vernal Field Office approved the 1979 *White River Wilderness Inventory Situation Evaluation Report* on February 21, 1979. The report recommendation is that the area does not qualify for further inventory and should be dropped from further review.

In 1999, the BLM reinventoried the White River area and determined that the area did contain wilderness characteristics. This determination is described as the BLM White River Inventory Area in the *1999 Utah Wilderness Inventory (revised 2003)*.

The proponents submitted information to the BLM Vernal Field Office on December 15, 2001. The submitted information included more detailed data than the BLM considered during the *1979 White River Wilderness Intensive Inventory Evaluation Report* concerning opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation, supplemental wilderness values, natural character, and photos. The boundaries of the proposal encompassed the BLM White River Inventory Area (WIA) and included additional lands beyond the WIA. The Vernal Field Office in April and May 2002 prepared *Evaluation of New Information* reports that indicated portions of the area to the north, east and west may contain wilderness characteristics. On September 3, 2002, SUWA submitted new and supplemental information that the lands to the south in their proposal also contain wilderness characteristics. The BLM Vernal Field Office reviewed this submission and prepared an *Evaluation of New Information* dated October 7, 2002. The report concurred with the office's previous determination.

On February 7, 2007, a Vernal Field Office interdisciplinary team reviewed the *1979 White River Wilderness Intensive Inventory Evaluation Report*; the *1999 BLM White River Wilderness Inventory Area*; the two SUWA/UWC submittals; and, the three Vernal Field Office 2002 *Evaluation of New Information Reports*. In addition, the interdisciplinary team reviewed changes to the area since 2002 that could affect the presence or absence of wilderness characteristics

This maintenance review did not include State of Utah lands or private lands. The attached map shows the BLM Vernal Field Office's determination of which lands contain or do not contain wilderness characteristics for the review area.

3. As a result of interdisciplinary review of relevant information (which may include aerial photographs, state and county road information, road maintenance agreements, prior documentation from the BLM inventories, field observations, maps, master title plats, evidence presented as new information by a proponent, etc.), do you conclude:

a.  The decision previously reached in the BLM inventories that the area lacks wilderness is still valid.

(or)

b.  Some or all of the area has wilderness characteristics as shown on the attached map.

4. Describe your findings regarding specific wilderness characteristics and provide detailed rationale.

a. **WIA Area:**

- (1). **Description:** The White River Inventory Area is located in eastern Uintah County about 30 air miles south-southeast of Vernal, Utah. Steep-walled, deep canyons and alternating ridges dominate the terrain in the area. The White River Canyon is the major canyon in the area and trends east to west. Several side canyons containing White River tributaries are present. These side canyons contain numerous pinnacles and colorful rock outcrops.

Vegetation north of the White River is a desert shrub community and includes saltbush, sagebrush, rabbit brush and other shrubs, grasses, and forbs. Higher elevations south of the river support piñon and juniper woodlands along the ridgelines. Cottonwood trees and other riparian plants are present along the river floodplain. Vegetation in the side canyons is mainly sagebrush and rabbit brush.

The WIA area is nearly 36% leased for oil and gas. For that part of the area considered to have wilderness characteristics, one well has a listed status of Plugged and Abandoned; one well is listed as drilling; and, 44 Applications for Permit to Drill (APDs) have been approved by the State of Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining (UDOGM). The BLM has not finalized the processing of these APDs. The State of Utah lands in the area are leased.

- (2). **Appearance of Naturalness:** The rugged topography and size of the area diminishes any human-made developments to be unnoticeable except for three small portions of the area. The terrain also separates the area from nearby oil and gas activity which has increased in activity since 2002. A historic structure called the Rock House is located in Atchees Wash in NWSENE, Section 33, T10S, R23E. The structure is being reviewed to determine stabilization and fencing methods. This will not affect the appearance of naturalness or wilderness characteristics of the area.

Usage of the Atchees Wash Road, the Asphalt Wash Road, and the Saddletree Wash Road has increased since the 1999 inventory and the UWC submissions in 2001 and 2002. The roads are now being regularly used by trucks hauling water from the White River for oil and gas exploration and development. These roads to the White River have been cherry-stemmed out of the acreage identified above.

An existing well location in Section 31, T.10S, R23E, and the access road has been cherry stemmed out of the area.

A small portion of the area in SWSE, Section 24, T10S, R22E, is segregated from the rest of the inventory area by State of Utah lands and privately owned lands. The portion is substantially less than 5,000 acres in size.

A small portion of the inventory area between the Atchees Wash Road and the eastern section line of Section 3, T11S, R23E, is segregated from the remainder of the inventory area by the road, State of Utah lands, and a patented mining claim. The portion is substantially less than 5,000 acres in size.

- (3). **Solitude, Primitive and Unconfined Recreation:** The size of the wilderness inventory area as described under Appearance of Naturalness, is large enough to ensure opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation. Visitors to the area take advantage of hiking, floating, camping, and photography. The most noteworthy recreation opportunity is to float the White River via canoes, kayaks, or rafts.
- (4). **Supplemental Values:** The area's geologic and topographic features provide scenic views for the visitor. The Powell Expedition of the Green and Colorado Rivers highlighted an area known as "Goblin City" found in the inventory area. Antelope, mule deer, and elk are common in the area. A variety of birds are found along the river and the canyon walls. Habitat for sensitive plant and animal species is present.
- (5). **Areas without wilderness characteristics:** That small portion of the area in SWSE, Section 24, T10S, R22E, is segregated from the rest of the inventory area by State of Utah lands and privately owned lands. The portion is contiguous to the west with the externally nominated area which is also segregated from the areas containing wilderness characteristics by State of Utah lands, privately-owned lands, and the Archy Bench Road. This portion of the proposed area is less than 5,000 acres and therefore, considered not to have wilderness characteristics.

A small portion of the inventory area between the Atchees Wash Road and the eastern section line of Section 3, T11S, R23E, is segregated from the remainder of the inventory area by the road, State of Utah lands, and a patented mining claim. The portion is contiguous to the south with the externally nominated area. This portion of the proposed area is less than 5,000 acres and therefore, considered not to have wilderness characteristics.

**b. Externally Nominated Area:**

- (1). **Description:** The UWC nominated area encompasses the BLM WIA area. Additional lands have been included mainly to the northeast, south, and west. The terrain near the White River is similar to that described above in Heading 4.a.(1). The area near the headwaters of the White River tributaries consists of deeply entrenched washes and wider intervening ridges. The area also contains many buttes and pinnacles.

The vegetation consists of piñon and juniper woodlands and several varieties of grasses and shrubs.

The additional area nominated by UWC is nearly 80% leased for oil and gas. For that part of the area considered to have wilderness characteristics, two wells have a listed status of Plugged and Abandoned; and, 14 APDs have been approved by the State of Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining (UDOGM). The BLM has not finalized the processing of these APDs.

In the area considered to not have wilderness characteristics, eight wells have a listed status of plugged and abandoned; 10 wells are in producing status; one well is in shut-in status; one well is in temporarily abandoned status; and, 17 APDs have been approved by the State of Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining (UDOGM). The BLM has not finalized the processing of these APDs. The State of Utah lands in the area are leased.

- (2). **Appearance of Naturalness:** UWC nominated lands in the northeast part of the area are for the most part similar to the WIA lands described above and are considered to contain wilderness characteristics.

Since 2002, an increase in human-made disturbances has occurred in that portion of the nominated lands located in Sections 31-33, T9S, R24E; the northernmost part of Section 6, T10S, R24E; and, Sections 17 and 20, T10S, R24E. The disturbance is from oil and gas exploration and development. The appearance of naturalness has been diminished.

Small portions of the nominated lands located in Sections 9 and 15, T10S, R23E have been segregated from the main body of the review area. Disturbances from oil and gas activities have diminished the naturalness of these portions. Each of these two portions of the review area is substantially less than 5,000 acres.

The nominated lands located in T11S, R2-24E, south of the WIA lands contain noticeable human-made disturbances associated with oil and gas activities. These activities have impacted and diminished the naturalness of the area. Only that portion of the nominated area in Sections 5-8 between Archy Draw Road and the cherry stemmed well access road to the east has maintained the appearance of naturalness.

Nominated lands located in T10S, R22E, on the west edge of the review area are segregated from other lands containing wilderness characteristics by State of Utah lands and the Archy Draw Road. The Archy Bench Road forms the western boundary of the area and ends at the White River. Disturbances associated with oil and gas exploration and development are west and east of this portion of the review area. This disturbance has diminished the naturalness of this portion. This portion is less than 5,000 acres in size.

- (3). **Solitude, Primitive and Unconfined Recreation:** In particular, the nominated area to the northeast is large enough to ensure opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation. Visitors to the area may take advantage of hiking, floating, camping, and photography. The most noteworthy recreation opportunity is to float the White River via canoes, kayaks, or rafts.
- (4). **Supplemental Values:** The area's geologic and topographic features provide scenic views for the visitor. Antelope, mule deer, and elk are common in the area. A variety of birds are found along the river and the canyon walls. Habitat for sensitive plant and animal species is present.
- (5). **Areas without wilderness characteristics:** The disturbance from oil and gas activities in that portion of the nominated lands located in Sections 31-33, T9S, R24E; the northernmost part of Section 6, T10S, R24E; and, Sections 17 and 20, T10S, R24E, has diminished the appearance of naturalness has been diminished. This portion of the nominated lands was determined by the interdisciplinary team to not contain wilderness characteristics.

The two small portions of the nominated lands located in Sections 9 and 15, T10S, R23E, are isolated from other areas containing wilderness characteristics. The portions are substantially less than 5,000 acres in size. Disturbances from oil and gas activities have diminished the naturalness in these portions. These portions of the nominated lands were determined by the interdisciplinary team to not contain wilderness characteristics.

The nominated lands located in T11S, R2-24E, south of the WIA lands contain noticeable human-made disturbances associated with oil and gas activities. These activities have impacted and diminished the naturalness of the area. Only that portion of the nominated area in Sections 5-8 between Archy Draw Road and the cherry stemmed well access road to the east has maintained the appearance of naturalness. These nominated lands were determined by the interdisciplinary team to not contain wilderness characteristics.

Nominated lands located in T10S, R22E, on the west edge of the review area are segregated from other lands containing wilderness characteristics by State of Utah lands and the Archy Draw Road. The lands are less than 5,000 acres in size. The Archy Bench Road forms the western boundary of the area and ends at the White River. Disturbances associated with oil and gas exploration and development are west and east of this portion of the review area but have diminished the naturalness of the lands. The lands were determined by the interdisciplinary team to not contain wilderness characteristics.

- c. As protocol for all VFO wilderness characteristic reviews, the Interdisciplinary Team determined appropriate set-back distances for pipelines, roads, and other R-O-Ws.

- d. The following table summarizes the Non-WSA lands in the review area that do or do not contain wilderness characteristics:

WHITE RIVER AREA			
Type of Lands	Non WSA Lands With Wilderness Characteristics (acres)	Non WSA Lands Without Wilderness Characteristics (acres)	Total Acres
UWC, Externally Nominated	7,408	8,474	15,882
WIA, BLM Identified	13,803	90	13,893
TOTAL ACRES	21,211	8,564	29,775

5. Document all information considered during the interdisciplinary team review (e.g. aerial photographs, state and county road information, road maintenance agreements, prior documentation from the BLM inventories, field observations, maps, master title plats, evidence presented as new information by a proponent, etc.)
- August 2006 NAIP (National Agricultural Imagery Program) aerial photos.
  - Master Title Plats.
  - State of Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining (UDOGM) approved, producing and plugged and abandoned oil and gas wells (current up to 1-25-07).
  - R-O-W using LR 2000.
  - Field Observations.
  - GIS layers for various resources including: Range improvements, Recreation facilities, Wildlife, and Fire including both Rx and fuels projects.
  - USGS digital topographic maps both 1:24,000 and 1:100,000.
  - Land status of the BLM.
  - The BLM road layer including roads on 1:24,000 scale and supplemented by both GPS and aerial photography.
  - Uintah County Roads layer August 2006.
  - UWC wilderness proposal data layer.
6. List the members of the interdisciplinary team and resource specialties represented.

<i>Chuck Patterson</i>	<i>Recreation</i>
<i>Kim Bartel</i>	<i>Recreation/wilderness</i>
<i>Tim Faircloth</i>	<i>Wildlife</i>
<i>Naomi Hatch</i>	<i>Realty</i>
<i>Jerry Kenczka</i>	<i>AFM Minerals</i>
<i>Howard Cleavinger</i>	<i>Associate Field Manager</i>
<i>Kyle Smith</i>	<i>GIS</i>
<i>Steve Knox</i>	<i>USO Planning Specialist</i>
<i>Kelly Buckner</i>	<i>NEPA</i>
<i>Mark Stavropoulos</i>	<i>Range</i>
<i>Blaine Phillips</i>	<i>Archeology</i>
<i>Steve Strong</i>	<i>Fire</i>
<i>Stephanie Howard</i>	<i>NEPA</i>

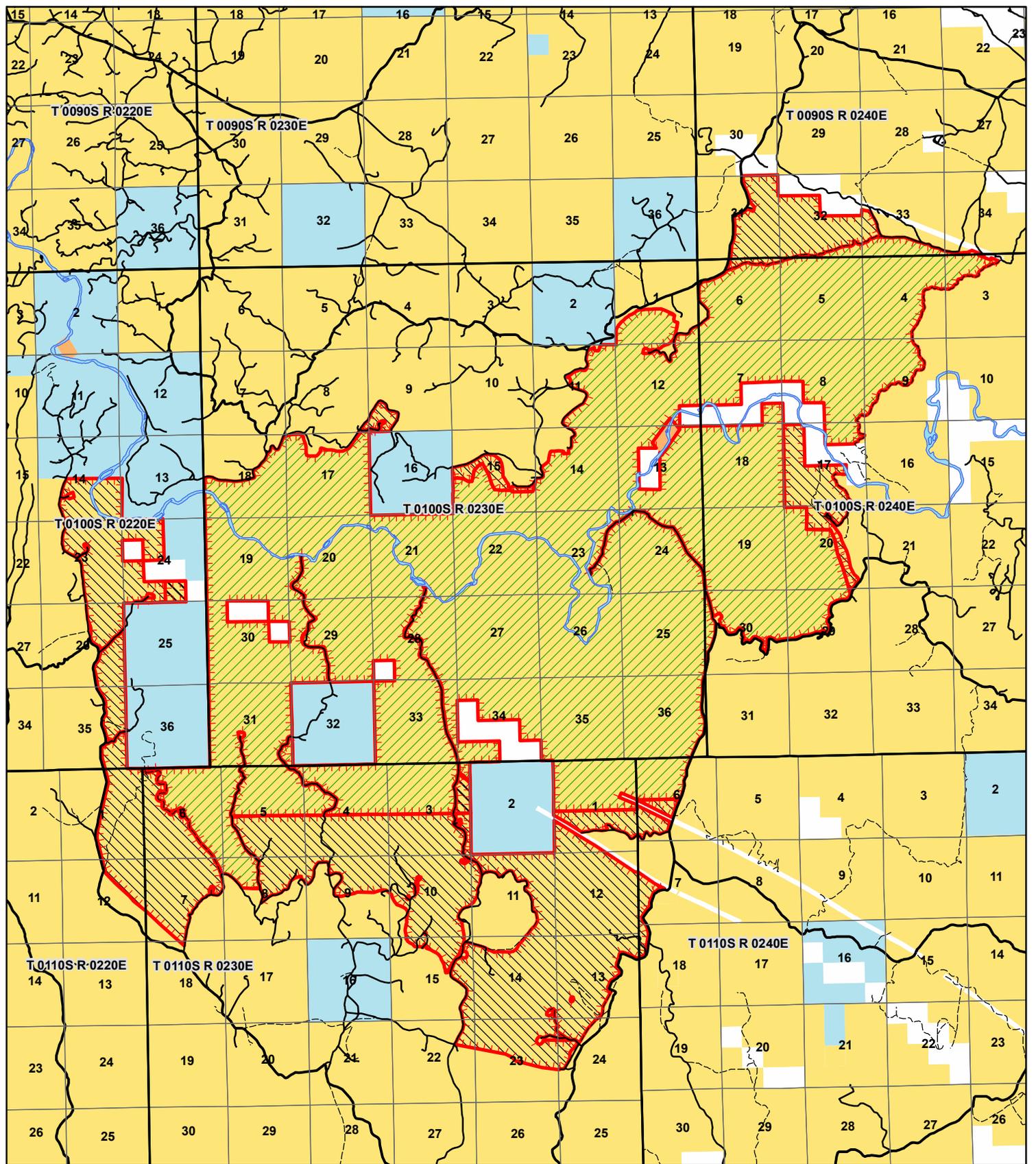
## 7. Signature / Concurrence

This review by a Vernal Field Office interdisciplinary team was conducted in February 2007. The purpose of the review was to identify for planning purposes those areas that are not Wilderness Study Areas (WSA) but do contain wilderness characteristics. A supplement to the draft Vernal Land Use Plan will, in Alternative E, analyze the impact from and to the identified wilderness characteristics. Until the Land Use Plan is completed, it should be noted that as part of a project-specific or site-specific analysis within this area, these findings will be used to assess impacts, if any, to wilderness characteristics within the project area.

I concur with the findings of the interdisciplinary team as described in this review.

Name: William A. [Signature] Date: 4/2/07  
Field Office Manager

This determination is part of an interim step in the BLM's internal decision-making process and does not constitute a decision that can be appealed.



## Field Office Decision for White River

Wilderness Characteristics Exist: 21,210 Acres  
 Wilderness Characteristics Do Not Exist: 8,564 Acres

- Wilderness Inventory Lands**
-  Review Area
  -  Wilderness Characteristics Exist
  -  Wilderness Characteristics Do Not Exist

- Land Status**
-  Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
  -  Indian Trust
  -  Private
  -  State

U. S. Department of the Interior  
 Bureau of Land Management  
 Vernal Field Office, Utah  
 April 2007  
 No warranty is made by the Bureau of Land Management  
 for use of any of the data for purposes not intended by BLM.

