

FAR SOUTH EGANS WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 53,224 acres

The Far South Egans WSA (NV-040-172) is located in east-central Nevada within Lincoln and Nye Counties. It lies about 50 road miles south of Ely, 200 miles north of Las Vegas, along U.S. Highway 318. The WSA is comprised entirely of public lands with no State or private inholdings. The boundaries of the WSA consist almost entirely of improved dirt roads. The northwest portion of the WSA is bounded by the Shingle Pass Road. The east boundary is formed by several jeep trails and roads along the west side of Cave Valley. The Trough Spring Canyon Road forms the unit's southern boundary. The west boundary generally follows the Highway 318 right-of-way with portions formed by other roads, unnatural features, or legal boundaries.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE - 42,316 acres recommended for wilderness 10,908 acres recommended for nonwilderness

The recommendation for wilderness designation is due to the quality of wilderness values, the lack of competing uses or other resource values, and the area's manageability.

The area recommended for wilderness is in the nearly pristine southern end of the Egan Range. The area's ruggedness has been primarily responsible for the perpetuation of its naturalness, and also contributes to its excellent scenic quality, especially on the west side where sheer rock cliffs rise up from small, hard-to-reach canyons. The view from on top is even more impressive. From the highest peak on the north end (elevation above 9,800 feet), the ridgeline slowly falls as it extends to the south; to both the east and the west, the land falls abruptly to elevations below 5,400 feet. Many portions are forested, not only by pinyon and juniper which are typical in this region, but also by bristlecone and ponderosa pines which are limited to the higher elevations.

This wild, untrammled setting provides many excellent opportunities for recreation. Hiking, camping and backpacking are demanding because of the terrain, but very rewarding and pleasurable because of the area's special features (bristlecone and ponderosa pines, an abandoned historic sawmill, high scenic values) and because of the impression that the many hidden places of the area have never before been visited. Nature study opportunities are very good in the WSA. Wildlife include deer, elk, mountain lions, and many raptors, such as golden eagles and ferruginous hawks.

The exhilaration of discovery extends into the mountains themselves. Whipple Cave, located on the northwest of the WSA, is a limestone solution cave with approximately 1,000 feet of known passages. Cave decorations include rimstone dams, draperies, and a huge column over 30 feet tall. Passage through the cave's double sink entrance requires a technical 70-foot descent. Technical climbers may also find challenge all along the western side of the WSA. Numerous rock outcrops and cliffs offer opportunities for a wide range of climbing skills. All of these recreational opportunities are available in an area where solitude is a guaranteed quality. The wildness of the area, its rugged topography and excellent vegetative screening, its many hidden recesses provide unparalleled opportunities for solitude.

Designation of the recommended area as wilderness would create very few conflicts with other, competing resources. This rugged portion does not lend itself to many uses, such as wood harvest and livestock grazing. There is very little mineral interest in the area, no mining claims are located in it, and oil and gas development seems to be a remote possibility. In addition, the area has public support and little opposition.

Two portions of the WSA were not recommended for wilderness for a variety of reasons. Portion A, on the west

periphery of the WSA is mostly gently sloping alluvial fans and was recommended for uses other than wilderness because of the lower wilderness values and unnatural features present. This area is penetrated by two cherrystemmed roads and 11 ways totalling 19 miles, as well as three cherrystemmed gravel pits. The area is lacking in topographic and vegetative relief and the unnatural features are easily seen.

Portion B, on the east side of the WSA was not recommended due to its relatively open nature with lower wilderness values, manageability concerns and conflicts with woodland products harvest. Several cherrystemmed routes extend into this portion, partially separating it from the suitable area. In addition, the easily accessible slopes have been used for limited woodcutting in the past and some unpermitted use is expected to continue even with wilderness designation. The area is very suitable for commercial fuelwood and Christmas tree harvesting.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The Far South Egans WSA as a whole is in a very natural state. That portion recommended suitable is in an almost pristine condition. Here, the rough terrain has held man's encroachment at bay. Forbidding cliffs, hidden caves and shelters, thick forests, and deeply cut canyons all enhance the primitive feeling of the WSA. Within Sawmill Canyon in the suitable portion of the WSA are the remnants of old logging operations from the turn of the century. In the many years that have passed since the logging occurred, the area has rehabilitated itself, and the few traces that remain are considered a special feature of historical value. In addition, one small, camouflaged guzzler for bighorn sheep was located within the suitable portion.

B. Solitude: The Far South Egans WSA offers outstanding opportunities for solitude. Topographic screening is provided by many canyons and by the rugged layout of the high mountain country. Adding to this is the large size of the area, dense tree cover in many portions, and good configuration. Also enhancing solitude opportunities is the lack of destination points (with the exception of Whipple Cave) that would serve to concentrate use. Recreational use would tend to be dispersed throughout the area, helping the natural carrying capacity of the area absorb a number of users while still allowing for solitude. The alluvial fans, most of which are not recommended for wilderness, provide less opportunity for solitude because of their lack of vegetative and topographic screening.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: Outstanding opportunities for primitive recreation exist in the Far South Egans WSA. One of the foremost is caving in Whipple Cave on the west side of the WSA. Several unconfirmed reports exist of other caves in the WSA. Many other recreation opportunities abound in the area. The dramatic topography of the mountains make for difficult but highly enjoyable hiking, camping, and backpacking. The extensive vistas of the area, especially as seen from the ridgeline, enhances all such opportunities.

The ponderosa and bristlecone pines occur together in one portion of the area, an unusual commingling, of interest to the studiers of nature. Other recreation opportunities include technical and nontechnical rock climbing and nature study. The combination of the quality and different types of recreation available in the WSA make for outstanding opportunities.

D. Special Features: Several special features exist in the Far South Egans WSA. The aforementioned ponderosa and bristlecone pines are special features because of their relative scarcity in this part of the region. Bristlecone pines are well-known as the oldest living plant species, and their existence in the WSA is especially significant because of the very low elevation at which they occur (as low as 7,000 feet) and their association with ponderosa pines in one portion. The ponderosa pines are a relict population from earlier climatological conditions. The remains of logging operations serve as a significant point of historic interest, a reminder of earlier times in Nevada when then-plentiful stands of ponderosa pines were heavily logged by small operators. Whipple Cave is also a special feature, an excellent example of limestone solutioning. For the

geologic sightseer, the vertical descent into the cave is well worth the effort.

4. MANAGEABILITY (the area must be capable of being managed to preserve its wilderness character)

The Far South Egans WSA is manageable as wilderness. Manageability is enhanced by the lack of private and State inholdings within the WSA. In addition, no mining claims exist within the WSA and no mineral exploration or development is anticipated.

Manageability of the area recommended for wilderness would be very easy. Further enhancing its manageability is the nature of the area: steep, rugged, abruptly rising from the surrounding valleys; characteristics that would cause the area to be largely self-protecting. The only exceptions occur in the north end where the land rises more gently and access is already available via three cherrystemmed routes and just south of the Shingle Pass Road. Some patrol efforts would be necessary to ensure that vehicles do not stray from existing routes. The Shingle Pass road creates a good northern WSA boundary.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

The U.S. Geological Survey and the Bureau of Mines prepared a mineral assessment for the Far South Egans WSA in 1987 (U.S. Geological Survey Bulletin 1728-C). The report identifies the majority of the portion of the WSA recommended for wilderness as having a low potential for the occurrence of all metals. Two small areas on the southern and western fringes of the area recommended for wilderness were identified as having moderate potential for the occurrence of mineral resources. Moderate potential for cadmium, molybdenum, lead, and zinc exists in the southern part of the study area related to a faulted jasperoid vein in Trough Spring Canyon. The confidence level for this rating is low. Potential for energy resources (oil, gas, geothermal) within the study area is low, based on exposed rock units. High geothermal potential is still recognized in the area of Butterfield Springs on the southwest border of the WSA.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC COMMENTS

During formal public review of the draft EIS and Wilderness Technical Report held between April 8 to July 8, 1983 a total of nine comments were received specifically addressing the Far South Egans WSA. Of those, six were written comments and three were oral testimonies. In general, all but one commentator supported wilderness designation for all or part of the WSA, while the remaining commentator mentioned the Far South Egans WSA but took no formal position on wilderness designation. The main points mentioned in support of this area as wilderness were its scenery, ruggedness and lack of conflicts.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Mines, Bureau of Reclamation, Fish and Wildlife Service, Environmental Protection Agency, National Park Service, and the Department of the Air Force all commented on the draft EIS. None of these agencies had a jurisdictional conflict with any of the alternatives. The Governor of Nevada as well as the State Divisions of State Lands, Parks, Forestry, and Historic Preservation and Archeology, support wilderness stating the unit "appears suitable for designation." The Nevada Department of Wildlife supports wilderness as well, stating "wildlife conflicts are not severe and designation may enhance populations by providing future protective measures. The Lincoln County Conservation District stated that the "area has some possibility for limited wilderness activity where mineral enrichment is not evident and the vegetation is closer to original condition.

One letter was received on the final EIS from the Environmental Protection Agency which supported the BLM's wilderness recommendation.