

## **TUNNEL SPRING WILDERNESS STUDY AREA**

### **1. THE STUDY AREA -15,968 acres**

The Tunnel Spring WSA (NV-050-166, UT-040-123) is in northwestern Washington County, Utah, and northeastern Lincoln County, Nevada. The WSA includes 10,568 acres of public land in Utah (Cougar Canyon WSA) and 5,400 acres in Nevada. No State, private, or split estate lands are included. In Utah, the study area is bordered on the north and northeast by the Dixie National Forest. In Nevada, the WSA is adjacent to public lands and Beaver Dam State Park on the southwest.

The WSA consists of steep, mountainous canyons, long ridges, and rough drainages. Various kinds of volcanic rocks predominate. The area is at the head of Beaver Dam Wash, and elevations range from 5,000 to 6,700 feet. Seven miles of perennial streams, six undeveloped springs, and one undeveloped spring are in the WSA. Vegetation is mostly pinyon-juniper and sagebrush. The climate is semiarid, with cold winters and warm summers.

### **2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE - 6,408 acres recommended for wilderness 9,560 acres recommended for nonwilderness**

The recommendation for this WSA is to designate 6,408 acres as wilderness and release 9,560 acres for uses other than wilderness. The recommendation differs from the proposed action listed in the Draft EIS. Public support for some wilderness designation of this WSA received during review of the Draft EIS prompted BLM to re-evaluate this area. This led to the development of the partial wilderness alternative which is now the proposed action in the Final EIS and the recommendation of this report.

The area recommended for wilderness designation includes all of the area with outstanding opportunities for solitude (1,300 acres) and primitive recreation (400 acres) and all of the highest visual qualities (5,400 acres). Cougars and a variety of raptors frequent the area. Rainbow trout, which are rare elsewhere in the vicinity, inhabit the streams. No conflicts exist with other uses.

The area recommended is mostly the northeastern portion of the WSA and includes about 4,228 acres in Washington County, Utah, and 2,180 acres in Lincoln County, Nevada. The boundary is along section and subsection lines that enclose the portion with the highest wilderness values.

In the northwestern part of the WSA, not recommended for wilderness designation, there are no outstanding opportunities for primitive recreation, visual aspects are common, and diversity of terrain and vegetation is limited. The southern portion of the WSA lacks diversity and outstanding opportunities for primitive recreation.

### **3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS**

**A. Naturalness:** The entire WSA meets Wilderness Act criteria for naturalness. Human intrusion that existed when the WSA was identified included six miles of range fences, one small tree and shrub planting in 1971 at Tunnel Springs (Nevada portion) for erosion control, and one enclosure at Middle Ridge in the south end of the WSA for grazing studies. More recently, a total of about one acre in the WSA has been disturbed by one spring development and one half mile of fence. All of these disturbances have been reclaimed to a substantially unnoticeable condition.

**B. Solitude:** About 1,300 acres, all in the area recommended for wilderness designation, meet the criteria

for outstanding opportunities for solitude. The tributaries and main canyons of the Pine Park-Split Pine Hollow, the tributaries and outcrops in the south rim of Pine Park Canyon, and the lower portion of Sheep Corral Canyon all provide topographic and vegetative screening of high quality.

The remaining 14,668 acres of the WSA do not meet the standards for outstanding solitude. The size and configuration of the WSA neither enhance nor lessen opportunities for solitude and many of the canyons are too shallow or wide to provide topographic screening.

The WSA is near the flight path for military aircraft from Nellis Air Force Base near Las Vegas. Subsonic flights by four aircraft at a time occur over the WSA as low as 100 feet above ground level, two or three times a week. Noise from the overflights detracts from solitude in the WSA.

**C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation:** Only 400 acres, in the northern and eastern parts of the WSA, provide outstanding opportunities for primitive recreation. These areas, Pine Park Canyon and the eastern portion of Sheep Corral Canyon, are easily accessible from the Dixie National Forest Pine Park Campground and provide excellent hiking in conjunction with opportunities for scenic viewing, fishing, bird watching, wading, picnicking, and photography. These areas are too rugged for horseback riding however, and are not ideal for big game hunting because of rough terrain.

Opportunities for primitive recreation are not outstanding in the remaining 15,568 acres (97 percent of the WSA). Dixie National Forest and Beaver Dam State Park, east and west of the WSA respectively, are relatively heavily used for recreation but few people enter the WSA, perhaps because of the rugged terrain and an assumption that it lacks recreational opportunities.

**D. Special Features:** Five to seven miles of streams in the WSA support trout fisheries, which are unusual in BLM lands in the surrounding desert region. These fisheries are in perennial waters in Beaver Dam Wash and are the only native reproducing fisheries in the area.

Candidate threatened or endangered species include the Virgin River spinedace which, with the speckled dace and desert sucker, may inhabit Beaver Dam Creek and its tributaries. The ferruginous hawk, Swainson's hawk, southern spotted owl, long-billed curlew, mountain plover, western snowy plover, western yellow-billed cuckoo, white-faced ibis, Arizona Bell's vireo, and Merriam's kangaroo rat are also resident species.

#### **4. MANAGEABILITY**

Tunnel Spring WSA can reasonably be managed as wilderness to preserve values present. The WSA is rugged, relatively remote, and currently has only low to moderate recreational use (500 annual visitor days, of which 125 are vehicular). No ways penetrate the WSA, vegetation is too sparse to provide woodland products, and mineral-related conflicts are unlikely. Livestock grazing could continue in accordance with the applicable BLM land use plans. Wilderness designation would strengthen current management efforts to protect the Beaver Dam watershed and provide wildlife habitat. Military overflights may continue, depending on Air Force needs and decisions. If the flights continue, the resulting distraction could not be mitigated by BLM administrative actions.

The 9,560 acre portion not recommended for wilderness designation would continue to be managed under applicable BLM plans. No change in management is anticipated if the area is released from wilderness study status. Current plans propose watershed and wildlife habitat improvements, keeping the area open for off road vehicle use, and maintaining 1,088 acres as public water reserves.

## **5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES**

The WSA is composed of volcanic rocks which are thought to be relatively thick. Because significant mineral resources are rarely found in volcanic rocks and because of the absence of mineral production and past interest in the area, there is little likelihood that any mineral resources exist in the WSA or that mineral-related activity will occur.

## **6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC PUBLIC COMMENTS**

During formal public review of the draft EIS, a total of 57 inputs specifically addressing this WSA were received, including 17 oral statements received at public hearings on the EIS. In general, 59 commentors supported wilderness designation for part or all of the WSA, 10 were opposed, and 5 commentors addressed the relative merits of the EIS, but took no formal position on wilderness designation.

Those favoring wilderness commented on the special features in the WSA and the protection of wildlife and wildlife habitat that wilderness designation would offer. The majority of those commenting were from other states. Those opposing wilderness did not have a consensus opinion. The majority were from rural Utah.

One Federal agency and the State of Utah commented on the draft EIS. Neither favored a particular alternative.

The Washington County Commission (Utah) opposes wilderness designation for this WSA.