

EL DORADO WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 12,290 acres

El Dorado Wilderness Study Area (WSA) (NV-050-423) lies in the southeastern portion of Clark County, Nevada, approximately one hour's drive from Las Vegas, Nevada. The study area contains 12,290 acres of public land and surrounds a private inholding of 87 acres in a roughly rectangular configuration, 5 miles long and 4 miles wide. It is bordered by the El Dorado Valley Act Lands (EVAL) to the north, Nevada State Route 165 to the west, Lake Mead National Recreation Area (LMNRA) on the east, and the mining town of Nelson to the south.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE -

**0 acres recommended for wilderness
12,290 acres recommended for nonwilderness**

The recommendation is to not designate this WSA as wilderness, but to release the area for uses other than wilderness. It is based upon a determination of potential resource conflicts, manageability concerns and the fact that the area possessing the highest wilderness values would not be sufficiently large to stand alone as wilderness without designation of the contiguous LMNRA lands. Placing the lands back in multiple resource management would allow for future reconsideration, under Section 202 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, of this area as a portion of the much larger area within the LMNRA, should the National Park Service (NPS) recommend that area for wilderness designation. Pending that review, the BLM would continue to manage the WSA in a manner that would preserve those values inherent in the study area.

External activities that could potentially impact or induce additional impacts to the WSA are future development of the EVAL for urban or industrial uses. Development of the valley would create additional roads and ways contiguous to the northern portion of the study area, which would improve access and encourage off-highway vehicle (OHV) travel into the WSA. There are few natural barriers to impede encroachment of OHV activity into much of the west and north-central portions of the WSA.

There is one patented mining claim within the WSA. Designation as wilderness could significantly impact future development of mineral resources and exploration within and adjacent to the El Dorado Mining District, adjacent to the southern portion of the WSA. BLM concurred with the State of Nevada that the highest and best use for this area is mineral development. Development of the patented mining claim, in the eastern portion of the WSA, would require BLM to authorize an access road which would significantly impair the wilderness values, in the northeast portion of the WSA, and detract from solitude and wilderness experience over a relatively large area.

Much of the northern portion of the WSA affords easy and unrestricted OHV access, up broad washes, to the core of the WSA. Implementation of a vehicle closure would be nearly impossible due to a distinct lack of clearly identifiable natural features to be used in developing a manageable boundary.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The majority of the WSA is in a natural condition. The rugged topography of the area has had limited development attempts by man. In an area of over 12,000 acres, man-made intrusions include vehicle tracks along washes of the western WSA, one developed spring and three short ways, totaling less than 1 mile each. These features are primarily visible within their immediate area, leaving approximately 95 percent of the study area unaffected by man.

Several man-made features create external imprints on the WSA. State Route 60 is adjacent to much of the

western edge of the study area and forms a portion of the southern boundary. The communities of Boulder City, 13 miles to the north, and Nelson, located at the southwestern corner of the WSA, are visible from high points along the western boundary. Several high voltage powerlines run across El Dorado Valley, approximately 3.5 miles northwest of the WSA. Mining activities continue along the southern boundary of the study area. These external imprints are visible from higher elevations within the WSA.

B. Solitude: The mountainous core of the WSA insures outstanding opportunities for solitude. The central and eastern portions of the WSA consist of rugged peaks and ridges, cut by wide washes, canyons and narrow drainages. Oak Creek and Lonesome Canyons, two long canyons filled with scrub oak, contain numerous secluded spots. Opportunities for a visitor to find a secluded spot are dependent on topographic and vegetative screening. Approximately 50 percent of the WSA consists of narrow drainages and wide canyons with pockets of dense vegetation that create outstanding opportunities for solitude. The gentle bajada of the northwestern region, with its sparse vegetative cover, permits an open view of external features and activities; limited opportunities for solitude would be available within this area.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: Recreational opportunities in the WSA are very good and quite varied. More primitive recreational use would be concentrated in the mountainous region of the study area where major canyons and drainages provide interesting features, seclusion and varying degrees of challenge. A powerline road and State Route 60 permit year-round access to the north, south and west boundaries of the WSA.

Backpacking, horseback riding and camping opportunities are considered outstanding in 50 percent of the WSA. Several routes north through the unit would permit scenic-hikes of more than one day's duration. Excellent camping sites are available in Oak Creek Canyon, with topographic and vegetative screening contributing to the wilderness experience.

Wildlife related recreational activities such as nature studies, photography and hunting are available in the WSA. Desert wildlife, including desert tortoise, bighorn sheep and wild burros, can be seen. Colorful landscapes, diverse geologic formations and scenic vistas provide excellent subject matter for photography. Populations of bighorn sheep and Gambel's quail make the WSA attractive to hunters.

D. Special Features: The WSA contains several supplemental values, not the least of which is its proximity to the LMNRA. Broad, uninterrupted vistas across the LMNRA and the Colorado River into Arizona are spectacular from the ridges and peaks in the WSA. Unique geologic features such as colorful tuff formations, basalt flows and a natural bridge (Gregory's Arch) contribute to the aesthetic experience within the WSA.

Desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*), listed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) as a threatened species on April 2, 1990, has been identified within the WSA. A total of 2,700 acres have been identified as tortoise habitat.

Ecologically, the area supports populations of Gambel's quail, bighorn sheep and wild burros. The El Dorado area is reported to be habitat for a mating pair of peregrine falcons, an endangered species. Two sensitive plant species (*Penstemon bicolor* ssp. *bicolor* and *Penstemon bicolor* ssp. *roseus*) have been identified in the WSA.

4. MANAGEABILITY

The WSA is capable of being managed as wilderness however, there would be concerns associated with OHV management and access for mineral development. The WSA surrounds a 120 acre undeveloped patented mining claim which lies along the study area's eastern boundary. Present access requires cross country travel through a small portion of the WSA. Exercising of the rights of access to the patented parcel could include motorized types of transportation.

The Western Utility group and other utility companies have proposed designation of an above and below ground utility corridor (in "Western Regional Corridor Study", 1986) across the southern portion of the WSA.

The northern boundary of the WSA is contiguous to the EVAL. They will most likely be intensively developed.

The WSA is contiguous along its eastern boundary to the LMNRA. The LMNRA Final Environmental Impact Statement-General Management Plan (GMP) released in July, 1986 identified these lands as meeting the criteria of the Wilderness Act of 1964.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

The entire WSA is classified as having low favorability for metallic and non-metallic minerals and moderate favorability for the occurrence of uranium. There are no known deposits of these resources in the study area. The entire WSA has a low favorability for the occurrence of sand and gravel. No material sites occur within the study area at present.

The WSA lies within the El Dorado Mining District, where significant amounts of gold, silver, and copper were produced. No development has taken place on the 24 mining claims located within the WSA.

No known oil and gas or geothermal deposits occur within the WSA. Also, no oil and gas leases exist within the WSA.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA SPECIFIC COMMENTS

A total of 28 oral statements were presented during hearings. One of the oral comments supported the preferred alternative (no wilderness) for the study area. The other comments did not specifically mention the WSA, but, generally opposed wilderness from the position of restricting personal rights and unknown mineral potential.

Of the 35 written comments, five supported the preferred alternative not to designate the area wilderness. Two of the five also identified the option for a modified partial wilderness alternative for the east portion of the study area not accessible to OHVs. Two comments supported a modified partial wilderness alternative that would include the east side of the WSA (9,570 acres) and the upper portion of the drainage system into the LMNRA proposed wilderness area. The subjects of the comments opposed to wilderness designation centered upon unknown wilderness potential and historic OHV use of the area.

The State of Nevada, including the Governor and various agencies, concurred with the recommendation.

There were no comments received from Federal agencies specifically directed towards this study area and none took a position on the recommendation for any WSA. The Environmental Protection Agency referred to mineral potential in all WSAs without rendering a statement or position on wilderness designation. The NPS mentioned unknown cultural resources as a reason for recommending designation of the WSA. The FWS identified wilderness designation as a method of protecting the threatened desert tortoise. Bureau of Mines comments were not specific.