

MUDDY MOUNTAINS WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 96,170 acres

Muddy Mountains Wilderness Study Area (WSA) (NV-050-229) is located in Clark County, approximately 20 miles northeast of Las Vegas, Nevada. It is irregular in shape, approximately 18 miles long and 14 miles across at its widest point. Beginning north of Color Rock Quarry and extending approximately 16 miles southeast to Bitter Spring, the northeast boundary is the American Borax Road. A combination of 4 miles of jeep trails, approximately 6 miles of common boundary with the Lake Mead National Recreation Area (LMNRA) and Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) administered land, private lands, and nearly 11 miles of road from Lovell Wash east to patented mining claims, is the southern boundary. The northwest boundary is the old Arrowhead Trail, a well used dirt road.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE - 36,850 acres recommended for wilderness 59,320 acres recommended for nonwilderness

It is recommended that approximately 36,850 acres be designated as wilderness and approximately 59,320 acres be released for uses other than wilderness. Outstanding wilderness values, high scenic quality, a pristine landscape, supplemental values of cultural and wildlife, easily identified boundaries and manageability were key considerations leading to the recommendation.

Intrusions from casual off-highway vehicle (OHV) use and mineral exploration are limited to the extreme southwest portion of the WSA, in the vicinity of the Gale Hills, and the extreme northeast area, south of Buffington Pockets. Extremely rugged topography in most of the WSA limits accessibility.

Opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation are outstanding in all areas of the WSA due to a diverse pattern and variety of topography, and its sheer size.

Significant cultural resources and geologic features are present adding to the educational and scientific values of the WSA.

Exploration and development of mineral resources, within the WSA, are expected to occur in the extreme southwest and east adjacent to or in close proximity to existing mining operations. Despite this, wilderness values present and scientific and educational values of the area far outweigh the resources at risk.

Much of the WSA is critical bighorn sheep habitat and wilderness designation would ensure that habitat is maintained in its present condition and would eliminate potential impacts to bighorn sheep.

Areas recommended to be released for uses other than wilderness, the broad sweeping bajadas and Bitter Spring Valley, could be potentially difficult to manage due to possible mineral development along the southwest boundary and accessibility to OHVs. At present, there is little risk to the existing character and naturalness in these areas and nondesignation will not significantly alter or affect values present, except in the southwest area should mineral values be developed. Mineral development in Bitter Spring Valley is not likely to occur.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The entire Muddy Mountain WSA is predominately natural. Little or no evidence of the presence of man is visible within the WSA, except in the northeast portion in the Buffington Pockets area where a number of ways occur. The way into Hidden valley, the core of the area recommended for wilderness designation, was closed in 1985 with the cooperation and assistance of OHV groups and other environmental

groups. Natural succession has begun and the area is returning to its natural state. Most OHV activity is concentrated outside of the area recommended for wilderness designation and is confined to the northeast and southwest portions of the WSA. The imprint of this activity is not substantially noticeable within the WSA and does not detract from the area's natural character.

Muddy Peak, Anniversary Narrow, West End Wash, and the rugged limestone and sandstone hills and valleys, which comprise the area recommended for designation, create a complex pattern of narrow, confined valleys, ridges and mountain peaks. This area is nearly pristine due to limited access and the rugged character of the area.

The 59,320 acres of WSA recommended for uses other than wilderness are primarily in a natural condition. However, the potential influence of external mining activities in the Gale Hills area may decrease the quality of the wilderness experience in the southwest corner of the WSA. There is a recent increase in interest in development of silica sand and gypsum resources in the West End Wash and Gale Hills area.

B. Solitude: Cliffs, peaks, numerous narrow canyons in the sandstone cliffs and boulders in the northwest portion of the WSA, and deeply cut canyons, such as Anniversary Narrows and Lovell Wash on the south and the deep canyon on the north end of the area recommended for wilderness designation, provide numerous opportunities for seclusion and a variety of scenic vistas and wilderness experiences for visitors in the Muddy Mountain core and most of the Gale Hills. The northern bajada, Bitter Spring Valley, White Basin, and two of the basins in the Gale Hills are broad open landscapes that offer a lesser degree of screening for solitude. Although most of the WSA is screened from outside sights and sounds, commercial and light military air traffic passes several thousand feet overhead.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: Dayhiking, backpacking, nature study, photography, technical rock climbing and scrambling are outstanding in this WSA. The extremely varied topography offers numerous destinations, trip lengths, challenge levels, and a nearly limitless variety of wilderness experiences. A temperate climate and the Bureau's Bitter Spring Back Country Byway provide easy access year round.

D. Special Features: Geological, archeological, and scenic resources and bighorn sheep are the outstanding features of the WSA. Unusual sandstone formations within Hidden and Wild Sheep Valleys were exposed by erosion creating a "fenster" or window through the overthrust limestone of the Muddy Mountain mass. Limestone cliffs form a scenic background and, from the top, offer outstanding views of basin and range physiography and Lake Mead. The conglomerate of the Gale Hills formation readily forms cliffs, the most impressive of which are the 600 foot West End Wash cliffs.

Desert bighorn are found throughout the WSA except during periods of drought. Several guzzler projects in the WSA and throughout the Muddy Mountains have been developed to expand the yearlong habitat of bighorn sheep. Wild horses and burros inhabit the southern and eastern portion of the WSA in the broad open valleys of Bitter Spring Valley and White Basin yearlong.

There are numerous archeological resources present. Site types include agave roasting pits, numerous pictograph and petroglyph panels, open camp sites, rock shelters, quarry sites, and lithic and ceramic scatters. Hidden Valley, eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, shows signs of occupation spanning over 4,000 years.

4. MANAGEABILITY

The entire Muddy Mountains WSA can reasonably be managed as wilderness to preserve wilderness values now present. The study area is a solid block of public land with no private inholdings, State lands or rights-of-way. The study area is easily identifiable with roads and trails defining its entire perimeter. OHV activity in the

east portion and mineral development in the southwest portion of the WSA would be management concerns. OHV activity in the east end of the WSA is limited to travel up a single dry wash. Mining activity and post claims are limited to the southwest portion of the WSA near West End Wash. There are no valid existing rights associated with claims in the WSA.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

The Muddy Mountains WSA, has a high potential for mineral deposits of calcium borates and lithium. Known and potential mineral deposits are concentrated in the east-central and south-central parts of the study area. Zeolites (in particular clinoptilolite) are present in some tuff beds throughout much of the study area with the majority of the deposits external to the WSA in the northeast, this inferred resource potential is probably moderate to high. Steam-sediment sampling suggests that the Muddy Mountains area has little potential for mineral deposits of metals other than lithium. Clay minerals are mined at one locality outside the WSA. Building stone and silica sand have moderate to low potential in some places.

Oil and gas potential within the study area is low. The U.S. Geological Survey determined that the petroleum potential for the study area is regarded as poor, chiefly because of the lack of known potential source rocks.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA SPECIFIC COMMENTS

During formal public review of the Draft EIS, a total of 42 comments specifically addressing this WSA were received. Of those, 39 were written comments and three were oral statements, all received at the public hearing on the Draft EIS. In general, 33 commentors supported wilderness designation for all or part of the WSA, including 9 who supported recommending more area for wilderness designation. Three commentors supported less acreage recommended for wilderness designation. Seven individuals who commented recommended no wilderness for the Muddy Mountain WSA.

Most comments which supported wilderness designation and specifically mentioned the WSA noted outstanding wilderness values, unspoiled biological and cultural resource values, outstanding and unusual scenic amenities of the study area, and wildlife habitat potential. Comments opposing wilderness focused on potential mineral resources and impacts to energy and mineral exploration and development. The area of concern for those who opposed wilderness designation or a reduced acreage for wilderness designation, the southwest and northeast portion of the WSA, is not recommended for wilderness designation.

Clark County Department of Comprehensive Planning, in general, supported the wilderness designation. The Governor of the State of Nevada supported the BLMs recommendation with a strong recommendation for excluding part of the southwest portion of the WSA "in order to allow continued access to mineral resources." Comment letters received from the State of Nevada Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Division of State Lands also supported the Bureau's Preferred Alternative. The State Divisions of Minerals, Department of Wildlife and Agriculture did not support the Preferred Alternative.

The U.S. National Park Service (NPS) concurred with recommending a portion of the Muddy Mountains study area for wilderness designation citing wilderness designation of contiguous public lands would enhance NPS management of the Bowl of Fire. The U.S. Air Force stated they support alternatives that do not restrict military overflights. The U.S. Geological Survey stated that geologic conditions were adequately considered in the Draft EIS. The EPA supported the proposed action and suggested that the final recommendation include a statement that water and air quality would be best protected under wilderness designation.