

PINE CREEK WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 24,618 acres¹

The Pine Creek Wilderness Study Area (WSA), (NV-050-414), is located approximately 15 miles west of Las Vegas, Nevada. It contains 24,618 acres of public lands, with no split estate or private inholdings. The majority of the WSA is inside the Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area (RRCNCA), in the southern portion of the Spring Mountain Range. The west boundary of the WSA is identified by a utility line right-of-way and the Lovell Canyon road. Private land in the Mountain Springs area and a utility line right-of-way mark the southern boundary. The Red Rock Summit road, marks the northern boundary of the WSA. The east boundary of the WSA follows the base of the Red Rock escarpment, skirting around two small parcels of State owned lands.

The National Forest and Public Lands of Nevada Enhancement Act (Public Law 100-550) adjusted the administrative boundaries for the Toiyabe National Forest, placing approximately 15 percent of the Pine Creek WSA within the new Forest boundary.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE - **22,966 acres recommended for wilderness **2,357 acres recommended for nonwilderness****

The recommendation for this WSA is to designate 22,966 acres of public land, including 705 acres outside the WSA, as wilderness and release approximately 2,357 acres for uses other than wilderness. Wilderness designation is recommended because of high quality wilderness values and special features, its easy accessibility for primitive and unconfined recreational uses, the lack of conflicts with other actual or potential uses, and the overwhelming public support for wilderness designation of this area.

Designation would preserve and protect an undisturbed area for several solitude-dependent wildlife species, and numerous prehistoric and historic archeological sites. This offers residents of a booming metropolitan area outstanding opportunities for a quality wilderness experience within 15 miles of the urban sprawl.

Outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation are available within the WSA. The numerous canyons and stands of ponderosa pine, pinyon, and juniper isolate visitors from one another and provide geological, ecological and scenic interest for hikers. The sheer sandstone cliffs challenge rock climbers and scramblers and serve as dramatic backdrops for photographers. Perennial springs, seasonally flowing streams, and waterfalls permit backpack camping yearlong. Wildlife viewing and nature study are particularly enjoyable in the cool, moist canyons which support a variety of small and large animal species and many rare and endemic plant types.

Within the area recommended for wilderness, extremely rugged terrain and dense vegetation have acted as a natural barrier, precluding motorized access. This inaccessibility enhances the manageability of the WSA. The RRCNCA encompasses most of the WSA where off-highway vehicle (OHV) use is limited to existing roads and trails.

Conflicts with other resource uses of the lands recommended for designation are limited. Seventy-five percent of the recommended area is contained within the RRCNCA and closed to mineral entry; the remaining western portion of the WSA is open to mining location.

¹All acreage figures were recalculated after passage of the Nevada Public Lands Enhancement Act which transferred lands within the WSA from BLM to Forest Service jurisdiction. The total increased by 618 acres.

Approximately 2,083 acres of BLM and 274 acres of Forest Service administered land, recommended as nonwilderness, are located along the eastern and western borders of the WSA. Adjustments to the eastern boundary delineated a more easily identifiable boundary along the base of the escarpment. This action would enhance the management of the WSA by providing a recognizable boundary for that portion of the WSA. The remaining acreage recommended as nonwilderness is located in a strip on the western boundary of the WSA, and include areas where OHV use is ongoing and not impeded by natural physical barriers. Management of this area for OHV use is considered to be more appropriate than for wilderness values.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The 22,966 acres recommended for wilderness are predominately natural. The sandstone cliffs of the escarpment, narrow canyons of Pine Creek, and the stands of ponderosa pine, pinyon and juniper have formed natural barriers to the intrusion of man. Rare and endemic plant species still flourish adjacent to the perennial stream and springs and along ephemeral water courses; solitude-dependent wildlife still find quality habitat within the WSA.

The majority of the area is free of man's imprints. A single 2 mile long cherry-stemmed way runs on the west side of the study area; this is a localized imprint visible only from the immediate vicinity.

B. Solitude: Within the area recommended for wilderness designation exists outstanding opportunities for solitude. The rugged complex of canyons and ridges provides excellent topographic screening. The sandstone cliffs have differentially weathered into natural arches, bridges and pockets that create numerous secluded spots. These geologic features are heavily interlaced with dense stands of pinyon-juniper and ponderosa pine, forming isolated glades in which the visitor is remote from even relatively nearby groups. Willow, ash, and hackberry form a secondary vegetative cover along the canyon bottoms. These distinctive features combine to create an area where not only can outstanding solitude be found, but where its enjoyment is greatly complemented by natural and scenic values.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: Opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation are outstanding in the area recommended for wilderness designation because of the variety, quality, and accessibility of the activities. Dayhiking, backpacking, rockclimbing and scrambling, nature study and photography are all enhanced by the unique geology, scenic beauty, rare and endemic biota, and rich cultural manifestations. Perennial spring and seasonal catchments provide year-round water sources for backpack camping.

D. Special Features: Several special features supplement the wilderness values of the area recommended for wilderness designation. The sandstone cliffs are the dominant landform feature. The cross-bedding of ancient sand dunes and the Keystone Overthrust of limestone are of geologic and paleontological interest. Weathering of the sandstone layers has created natural bridges, arches, and sloughs through which seasonal runoff cascades as waterfalls to the canyons below.

Canyons below the escarpment create micro-climates that sustain botanical resources dramatically different from those of the surrounding Mohave desert. They support species of milkvetch, penstemon, worts, and numerous ferns that are endemic to Red Rock Canyon and the Spring Mountains. Relic stands of ponderosa pine occur at unusually low elevations in the WSA.

Unique plant communities and reliable water sources of the Pine Creek WSA sustain a variety of solitude-dependent animals. A sizeable herd of bighorn sheep find crucial summer habitat within the area recommended for wilderness. The presence of kit fox, bobcat, mountain lion, and a variety of raptors also offers excellent opportunities for scientific observation and nature study in this WSA.

A wide range of cultural resources are of special value in the reconstruction of regional history. High concentrations of rock art sites, with both petroglyphs and the more unusual pictographs, rock shelters, and campsites suggest that the unique biomes within the WSA were very important to early peoples. Milling stations and agave roasting pits point to the processing of local plant resources. The historic Spanish trail also passes through the extreme southern end of the WSA.

4. MANAGEABILITY

The entire WSA and the additional acreage recommended for wilderness designation could reasonably be managed as wilderness to preserve values now present in the area. The area is a solid block of public land with no private inholdings, State lands or rights-of-way. OHV use is confined to existing ways within the WSA, and designated roads in the RRCNCA.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

The WSA has moderate favorability for oil and gas, low favorability for geothermal, and low favorability to unfavorable for metallic minerals. The entire WSA is moderately favorable for sand and gravel resources.

Sixty-five percent (15,600 acres) of the WSA is contained in the RRCNCA, and thus segregated from mining laws, preventing mineral entry. An additional 150 acre area, Pine Creek Research Natural Area, is also withdrawn from mineral entry. There are twelve oil and gas leases covering 22,800 acres of the WSA. Approximately 35 post-FLPMA mining claims are located in the southwest portion of the WSA. This area is not recommended for wilderness.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA SPECIFIC PUBLIC COMMENTS

During formal public review of the draft EIS, a total of 33 comments specifically addressing this WSA were received. Of those, 32 were written comments and one was an oral statement, all received at the public hearing on the draft EIS. In general, 30 commentors supported wilderness designation for all or part of the WSA, including three who wanted more area in the recommended wilderness area. Three commentors supported no wilderness for the Pine Creek WSA.

Most comments which supported wilderness designation and specifically mentioned the WSA noted the high wilderness values (outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation), the unspoiled biological and cultural resource values, and the wildlife habitat potential. Comments opposing wilderness focused on the potential mineral resource and impacts to energy and mineral exploration and development.

Clark County Department of Comprehensive Planning supported the emphasis on recreation management for the Spring Mountains and agreed that designating portions of the Spring Mountains would enhance the range of recreation opportunities for the citizens of Clark County.

The Governor of Nevada supported the Preferred Alternative, 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 from other State agencies did not support the Preferred Alternative.

The U.S. Forest Service supported the Preferred Alternative. The U.S. Air Force stated they support alternatives that do not restrict military overflights. The EPA supported the proposed action and recommended that a statement be added that water and air quality would be best protected under wilderness designation.