

SOUTH McCULLOUGH MOUNTAINS WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

I. THE STUDY AREA - 56,623 acres

The South McCullough Mountains Wilderness Study Area (WSA) (NV-050-435) is located approximately 35 miles south of Las Vegas. The WSA contains approximately 56,623 acres of BLM land, with no split estate or private inholdings.

The northeast corner of the WSA begins approximately 2,000 feet west of powerline R/W Nev 066156 on the township line, which is the southern boundary of the Eldorado Valley Act Lands (EVAL), runs west approximately two and one-half miles along the township line and then runs north on the common line between R.61E. and R.62 E. for approximately one and one-half miles. The north boundary then extends west up a wash and across a low saddle before dropping into a wash on the west side of the mountain. Two dry washes on the west side of the main portion of the mountain clearly identify the northwest WSA boundary. At the southern end of the northwest boundary, the boundary turns northwest along the shoulder of a jeep trail for approximately two miles to the north section line of T.26S., R.60E., Sections 25 and 26. A jeep trail and dry wash are the west boundary. From this point the access road into Railroad Spring is cherry-stemmed 25 feet on both sides of the road centerline, for approximately three miles to range improvements near the spring source. The southern boundary is identified by washes and point to point topographic features. The southeast boundary is a series of point to point features, section lines and the shoulder of the road from Pine Spring to where the road intersects a line parallel to powerline right-of-way Nev 066156 and 2,000 feet west of the powerline centerline. The eastern boundary is a line parallel to R/W Nev 066156, 2,000 feet west of the centerline, from the Pine Spring road north to the south boundary of the EVAL lands. Approximately mid-way on the eastern boundary a 40 acre private parcel and the access road is cherry-stemmed with a series of peak to peak lines.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE -

19,558 acres recommended for wilderness

37,065 acres recommended for nonwilderness

The recommendation for this WSA is to designate 19,558 acres as wilderness and release 37,065 acres for uses other than wilderness. The recommendation emphasizes outstanding opportunities for solitude, easy access to a high diversity of primitive and unconfined recreation, and limited conflicts with other actual or potential uses of the area while maintaining access to portions of the WSA with moderate mineralization potential. The recommendation would add and protect an area of diverse natural and cultural values.

The area recommended for uses other than wilderness comprise three parcels, encompassing the eastern and western bajadas and the southern mountainous portions of the WSA. The recommendation emphasizes maintaining access, to the area not recommended for designation, for mineral exploration and extraction, off-highway vehicle (OHV) use, and other uses other than wilderness. Numerous mining claims are located within the southern portion and it is projected that if the area were not designated, mineral development would eventually occur. Large bajadas form most of the area recommended for uses other than wilderness and is characterized by a lack of topographic relief and low growing desert shrubs. Few secluded or isolated locales are available in which a visitor could be screened and opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation are less diverse. A lack of natural barriers make the eastern and western bajadas suitable for OHV use. Management of these areas for existing and potential OHV use is considered more appropriate than for their wilderness values.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The WSA is virtually free of obvious human impacts. The mountain range consists of an

undulating crest flanked with rocky outcrops and occasional cliffs. The central ridge is divided by numerous draws and drainages into many separate summits. A pinyon-juniper forest occupies the steep canyons and gullies of the west slope and the upper reaches of the long canyons on the east. The southern portion of the WSA is blanketed with taller shrubs and joshua trees. The unobtrusive landscape projects a sense of remoteness with little influence of outside human activities. Internal man-made features are limited to two old mine tunnels and four developed springs. These imprints are substantially unnoticeable except within their immediate vicinity and do not detract from the area's natural character.

The sloping bajadas that comprise the northeast and southwest portions of the area are wide open expanses consisting of low desert shrubs and joshua trees. The southern mountainous area is a jumble of rounded peaks and shallow ridges that slope into wide drainages. This area is covered with pinyon and juniper trees and low growing desert shrubs. The open landscape provides wide open vistas, occasionally interrupted by the few man-made features that exist within the area.

Several outside influences that includes roads, a tin shack, water troughs, corrals, a mining site, a communication site, and power lines directly affect the natural quality of the area not recommended for wilderness designation. The eye is drawn to the endless series of ranges and dry lakes; the powerline and other intrusions are overlooked. The primitive nature of the spring access roads and the screening of the springs limit their influence.

B. Solitude: Within the area recommended for wilderness, outstanding opportunities for solitude exist. The numerous summits, draws and ridges that divide the central ridge provide excellent screening. The side canyons and slopes are heavily forested with pinyon and juniper trees which give additional cover. Those portions of the area containing rocky peaks, drainages and outcrops offer secluded locales in which to retreat. Although roads and a powerline are seen from within portions of the recommended area, a sense of remoteness from human activities is maintained.

Opportunities for solitude exist, but are limited, within the area recommended for nonwilderness. The sloping bajadas of the northeast and southwest provide minimal topographic or vegetative screening or cover. The washes on the southeastern bajada offer more opportunities for solitude, with the joshua trees and taller shrubs providing better screening and cover. The southern portion provides the best opportunities for solitude in this part of the WSA, as the deep, gently rolling terrain densely forested with pinyon and juniper trees, offers good cover and a number of isolated pockets and locales.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: Primitive recreation opportunities are outstanding in the area recommended for wilderness because of the variety of activities available. Year-round easy access, scenic views, diverse topography and vegetation, and the availability of nearby water enhances dayhiking, backpacking, rock scrambling, wildlife viewing, limited hunting and horseback riding.

Fewer primitive recreational opportunities are found within the area recommended for nonwilderness. Visitors could utilize a limited portion of the area for hiking, camping and horseback riding; interesting features and challenging terrain are less available here.

D. Special Features: Numerous signs of aboriginal habitation have been found in the recommended area, indicating long-term exploitation of the upland resources. Identified site types include habitation sites at rock shelters, rock art panel, campsites, a wickiup site, pinenut caches, and lithic scatters. These cultural values would be further protected from the impacts of development by wilderness designation.

Living resources like bighorn sheep, Gambel's quail, chukar and other upland bird species are present in the WSA and would benefit from wilderness designation. These solitude-dependent species offer excellent subjects for nature study, photography, and wildlife viewing.

Desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*), listed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a threatened species on April 2, 1990, has been identified within the WSA in the bajada areas.

4. MANAGEABILITY

The entire WSA can 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. An estimated 124 post-FLPMA mining load claims, one pre-FLPMA load claim, and 60 post-FLPMA placer claims are located within the WSA. Only the one pre-FLPMA claim has valid existing rights. One oil and gas lease encumbers approximately 320 acres in an area not recommended for wilderness.

Wilderness designation of the areas recommended for uses other than wilderness would pose a critical manageability problem (OHV use). OHV travel for hunting, camping, and sightseeing currently occurs along the bajadas, cherrystemmed portions of the area and the way. No natural barriers to these uses are present in the portions recommended for non-wilderness; such motorized recreational activities are projected to continue and increase.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

Throughout the WSA there is a low to moderate potential for silver, gold, lead, copper, zinc, lanthanum and other rare-earth elements, uranium, thorium, niobium, tungsten and copper with 24 percent of the study area having an unknown resource potential for the same minerals as well as zinc. The entire study area has no resource potential for oil and gas and coal, as well as a low resource potential for these nonmetallic commodities: dimension stone; sand and gravel; pegmatite minerals such as feldspar and mica; and geothermal resources.

An estimated 124 post-FLPMA mining load claims, one pre-FLPMA load claim, and 60 post-FLPMA placer claims are located within the WSA. Only the one pre-FLPMA claim has valid existing rights. One 320 acre oil and gas lease is located in the northeast in a portion not recommended for wilderness.

Neither non-energy mineral resource or energy resource development is projected to occur within the area recommended for wilderness designation. Mineral development for metallic minerals is projected to eventually occur within the southern portion of the area not recommended for wilderness.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA SPECIFIC COMMENTS

Out of the 29 comments received, 24 commentors supported wilderness designation for all or part of the WSA. Five commentors supported no wilderness for the South McCullough Mountains WSA. Most comments touch on high wilderness values and the dozens of unique supplementary values. A utility company wanted to protect and preserve the integrity of their facilities located near the WSA.

The Clark County Department of Comprehensive Planning generally agreed with the recommended wilderness designations contained within the Preferred Alternative in the Clark Draft EIS.

The Governor of Nevada did not support the Bureau's preliminary Preferred Alternative recommendation of no wilderness. In response to the Governor's comments the Bureau amended the Preferred Alternative recommending 19,558 acres for wilderness designation. The Governor concurred with the final recommendation. The State Division of Minerals and Department of Wildlife recommended the no wilderness designation.

The U.S. Air Force stated they support alternatives that do not restrict military overflights. The EPA supported

the proposed action and recommended that the final recommendation include a statement to the effect that water and air quality would best be protected under wilderness designation.