

Wilderness: An Unexpected Second Chance

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Abstract—The Federal Land Policy & Management Act of 1976 directed the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to inventory its lands for wilderness characteristics and to protect identified areas as “wilderness study areas” (WSAs) until acted upon by Congress. BLM conducted these inventories and studies between 1976 and 1991, finding nearly 800 areas totaling 9.6 million hectares to possess wilderness characteristics. The remaining areas, released from “interim management” protection, were expected to be further degraded by uses not allowed within WSAs. In the ensuing 20 to 30 years, however, a surprising number of formerly unqualified areas have now been found to meet minimum wilderness criteria. Using Oregon public lands as an example, this paper highlights events, prompted largely by non-governmental organizations conducting “citizen inventories,” and renewed wilderness inventory efforts conducted by the BLM, that have led to an unexpected second chance to recognize new areas with wilderness characteristics.

Introduction

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which administers 105 million hectares of Federal surface and 283 million hectares of subsurface mineral estate in the United States, was belatedly added to the list of agencies authorized, through the 1964 Wilderness Act (<http://wilderness.org/content/wilderness-act-1964>), to inventory, study, and manage wilderness areas. The Federal Land Policy & Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA) (<http://www.blm.gov/flpma/>), which firmly established the BLM as an agency that would manage lands “in perpetuity,” included a provision directing BLM to inventory the public lands under its management for areas possessing wilderness characteristics and to manage such “wilderness study areas” to preserve their wilderness character until such time that Congress either designates them as wilderness or releases them from further wilderness study.

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Areas deemed to have wilderness characteristics must meet the minimum Wilderness Act criteria of (1) size—roadless areas of at least 2,024 hectares or of a manageable size, (2) naturalness—generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, and (3) opportunities—provides outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined types of recreation. Wilderness characteristics and wilderness values are used synonymously in this paper. BLM conducted these inventories and studies between 1976 and 1991, finding nearly 800 areas totaling approximately 9.6 million hectares to possess wilderness character. Today, BLM manages 224 Wilderness Areas totaling 3.5 million hectares, and 545 Wilderness Study Areas totaling 5.2 million hectares.

Areas not found to possess wilderness characteristics were released from “interim management” protection. Over time, it was presumed that, in the absence of special protection, lands outside WSAs would be further degraded by uses not allowed within WSAs. In the 20 to 30 years that have elapsed since the original inventories, however, circumstances have combined in a surprising number of areas to reverse factors that formerly precluded them from meeting minimum wilderness criteria.

Play It Again, Uncle Sam: Why Are Updated Inventories Finding Wilderness Values Among Previously Unqualified Lands?

Among the many factors causing areas to revert to more wild conditions, we’re finding that three factors dominate. First, natural revegetation has occurred over large swaths of public lands that were mechanically treated over 30 years ago to restore productivity on overgrazed lands. Disked and drill-seeded rows of non-native grasses are no longer visible due to infilling of sagebrush and other native shrubs. Human imprints need only be “substantially unnoticeable” for an area to be considered “natural” for wilderness inventory purposes. Second, some former land uses no longer occur on formerly occupied lands (e.g., abandoned, reclaimed mining operations or road access to now unused developments). The third factor involves acquisition of non-Federal lands, either adjoining existing WSAs or blocking up formerly scattered lands so that they now meet the minimum size requirement.

BLM is updating its original inventories to support project analyses and land use planning efforts. In eastern Oregon, BLM has so far discovered over 92,000 hectares of additional lands with wilderness characteristics. Inventory updates are planned for an additional 2.6 million hectares of lands that previously failed to meet minimum wilderness criteria.

The Only Constant Is Change: How Are Trends in Wilderness Characteristics Changing on BLM- Administered Lands? _____

In general, population growth in the United States has been greatest in the 11 western states that include most of the land under BLM management. In eastern Oregon, we are finding that development pressures and use increase with proximity to growing population centers, while “wildness” has increased in the remotest areas. But circumstances are rapidly changing in many remote areas as the United States embraces renewable energy. Proposals for wind and solar energy are multiplying in areas not previously subjected to energy development for lack of oil, gas, or coal resources. Mixed ownerships exacerbate the potential effects as private landowners, surrounded by Federal lands, seek economic opportunities that renewable energy offers, placing pressure on adjoining Federal lands for expanded development or, at a minimum, transmission line rights-of-way.

Coping with Change: How is BLM Responding to These Trends? _____

BLM’s stewardship responsibilities require careful evaluation and consideration of multiple-use proposals in light of the multiple values existing on public lands. Accordingly, we maintain current inventories of resource values, including wilderness values, on the public lands (as per FLPMA, Section 201). We assess environmental impacts of land use proposals on resource values, including wilderness values (as per the National Environmental Policy Act). And, we plan for the protection and use of natural resources, including wilderness resources (as per FLPMA, Section 202).

Conclusions _____

Through our inventory, analysis, and planning processes, these newly recognized wilderness resources can now be considered for protection through land use plans. Whether expected or not, these areas may become future candidates for addition to the U.S. National Wilderness Preservation System.

The content of this paper reflects the views of the authors, who are responsible for the facts and accuracy of the information presented herein.
