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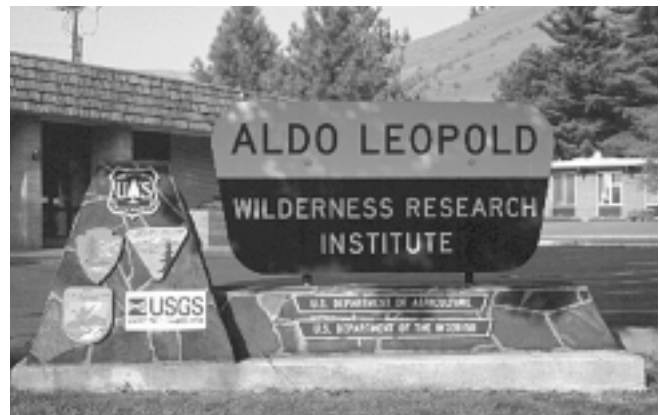
Update on Wilderness Character Monitoring

BY PETER LANDRES

When Hubert Humphrey first introduced the Wilderness Act to the U.S. Senate in 1956, he said that “the agency having jurisdiction over any area within this [Wilderness] System will have the sanction and encouragement of Congress and the legal responsibility for preserving the area’s wilderness character.” Now, five decades later, the U.S. Forest Service developed a protocol to monitor trends in wilderness character. This protocol, as explained in *IJW* articles published in December 2004 and December 2006, assesses whether the wilderness character of a wilderness area is improving, stable, or degrading.

The other wilderness managing agencies (Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Park Service) contributed staff and funding to this Forest Service (U.S. Department of Agriculture) effort. By the end of fiscal year 2006, the agencies (primarily the Forest Service) had spent more than \$500,000 and approximately 250 people were involved in developing, testing, and revising this protocol to monitor wilderness character. The processes used and products developed from this effort can be found on the Web sites <http://leopold.wilderness.net/research/projects/F014.htm> and <http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=WC>.

Despite the resources already expended, the status of wilderness character monitoring in the Forest Service is now uncertain. With seriously declining budgets and reduced staffing, the Forest Service is unable to move forward with national implementation at this time. With this decision made in February 2007, the cochairs of the



Forest Service effort (Steve Boutcher and I) will document all aspects of this work so that, should the Forest Service decide at a later time to implement national monitoring of wilderness character, it will be able to do so with minimal effort.

Building on the substantial effort of the Forest Service, a new interagency team was recently formed to develop recommendations for monitoring wilderness character across the National Wilderness Preservation System as well as recommendations for agency-specific plans to implement this monitoring. These recommendations will go to the Interagency Wilderness Steering Committee (IWSC), which is composed of the agencies national wilderness program leaders, and a representative from the U.S. Geological Service (USGS) and Forest Service Research and Development. The new team is composed of two representatives from each of the four wilderness agencies and one USGS representative. Having met for the first

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time in January 2007, the interagency team will deliver its recommendations to the IWSC by February 2008. More information about this interagency team—its Operating Agreement, members, and work plan—can be found on the Web site http://leopold.wilderness.net/interagency/wcm_docs.htm.

Despite an uncertain future for wilderness character monitoring in the Forest Service, the importance of assessing trends in wilderness charac-

ter seems to be taking hold across all four wilderness managing agencies. Furthermore, documents produced from the Forest Service effort provide a comprehensive and useful framework for thinking about wilderness character and what affects it. This framework is already influencing several vital aspects of wilderness stewardship. For example, it was incorporated into the Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center's *Minimum Requirement Decision Guide*

(<http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=MRDG>), and it is being used by wilderness managers in long-term planning efforts, in setting priorities for wilderness implementation activities, and in analyzing the effects from proposed activities. With support from the wilderness community, trends in wilderness character could be monitored across the nation, and managers would be able to assess the outcomes of their stewardship on preserving wilderness character. **IJW**

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