

Final Wilderness Characteristic Determinations August 1, 2005

Public comments disputing the initial determination done by LSFO in May, 2005 were received by Moffat County, Vermillion Ranch, Colorado State Land Board, and a consortium of conservation groups including Colorado Wilderness Network, The Wilderness Society, Colorado Environmental Coalition, Colorado Mountain Club, and Sierra Club. Julander Energy sent a letter concurring with Moffat County's comments.

Comments pertaining to wilderness characteristics in Vermillion Basin were not considered by the BLM at this time. The wilderness inventory finalized in 2001 concluded that 77,067 acres out of 81,028 total acres in the Vermillion Basin area have wilderness characteristics. The BLM acknowledges that Moffat County disputes this determination. Only comments pertaining to the wilderness character assessment done in conjunction with the Little Snake RMP revision were considered.

On August 1, the LSFO interdisciplinary team met again to review these comments and new data to make final determinations on the presence of wilderness character in the following areas. Present were Jim McBrayer, Rob Schmitzer, Hal Keesling, Jeremy Casterson, and Fred Conrath.

LSFO has been asked to articulate why the current determinations are different from the original wilderness inventoried, which were summarized in the 1991 Report to Congress. The major reason for the different findings is that the imprints of man that existed during the original inventories have gone away or decreased in visibility over time. For example, while overall motorized use has increased in LSFO, motorized routes in areas with wilderness values have often re-vegetated as use decreased in some areas over the last 20 years. Additionally, perceptions of wilderness characteristics may have changed over time. Concepts such as what constitutes solitude and outstanding opportunities for primitive recreation change as the landscape sees more development, more people, and increased interest in arid environments. During the past two decades, agencies and the public have interpreted the Wilderness Act in a broader context and begun to take a closer look at the wild areas outside of the typical high-alpine environments. Finally, while some of the original inventories were done without much actual presence on the ground, years of visiting these areas on the ground by staff have given LSFO a better understanding of the wilderness values in these areas. We have made an effort to get back into these places for a more detailed look. This on-the-ground knowledge of the areas on question has allowed the BLM to make more informed wilderness character determinations.

Cold Springs Mountain area (outside the WSA)

In its initial assessment in May, LSFO determined that wilderness characteristics are likely to be present in this area. Comments received indicated the presence of developments in the area, including pipelines, reservoirs and developed springs, tanks, trails, and fences.

While BLM acknowledges that developments do exist in the area, they are mostly temporary and not significant in number and presence, therefore do not detract from overall naturalness of area. The water pipeline west of Spitzie Draw is inside the WSA, therefore does not detract from

wilderness character outside the WSA. The water developments are small-scale stock ponds, not considered reservoirs by the BLM, and do not substantially affect the naturalness of the region.

Presence of mineral potential, split estate minerals and grazing allotments requiring mechanized access, as well as concerns about economic impacts do not detract from the wilderness characteristics of the area, but instead factor into the management decision of protecting these areas.

Final determination: The Cold Springs Mountain area outside the existing WSA is likely to contain wilderness characteristics.

Dinosaur Adjacent (outside WSAs), including Wild Mountain, Chew Winter Camp North, Tepee Draw, Vale of Tears North

In its initial assessment in May, LSFO determined that wilderness characteristics are likely to be present in much of this area. Specifically, LSFO concluded that Chew Winter Camp North, Tepee Draw, Vale of Tears North, Wild Mountain and the Happy Hollow area were likely to contain wilderness characteristics. Comments received indicated the presence of developments in the area, including rights-of-way (ROW) and fences.

There are very few developments in this area, and those are temporary in nature and not significant in number, therefore do not detract from overall naturalness of area. There are no BLM-recognized ROW in the area. The privately-owned copper mine referenced in the comments is outside of area likely to contain wilderness characteristics. Wild Mountain

Imprints of man in the Wild Mountain area include OHV routes, fences, stock ponds and a wildlife guzzler. None of these imprints represent a major surface disturbance. Cumulatively their impact is slight due their scattered nature. The degree of naturalness is impacted by the presence of range improvements, routes, fences, etc. However, it appears likely the area meets the naturalness criteria.

Presence of split estate minerals, grazing allotments requiring mechanized access, private land, forest products potential, as well as concerns about impacts to the local economy do not detract from the wilderness characteristics of the area, but instead factor into the management decision of protecting these areas.

Final Determination: The areas adjacent to Dinosaur National Monument are likely to contain wilderness characteristics.

Cross Mountain (outside WSA)

In its initial assessment in May, LSFO determined that wilderness characteristics are not likely to be present in the area outside of the WSA.

Comments contend that routes west of the WSA (labeled CM 26 and CM18 in the Wilderness Character Inventory Report) do not currently meet the definition of a road, and are either closed, not used, or not maintained, and do not represent a significant imprint of man. However, BLM

contends that the routes that delineate the WSA were mechanically-created and maintained routes.

Comments contend that this area south of the WSA was excluded from 1980 WSA because of vehicle routes (CM1, CM9, CM8, CM7, CM6, CM5, CM 3, CM 2, CM13, and CM14) and that these do not meet the definition of road nor represent significant imprint of man. However, the main road accessing the parking area near the canyon has been maintained in the past. More importantly, the sheer number of routes in the area greatly affects the overall naturalness of the area. Therefore, the BLM has determined that the area is not predominately free of the hand of man because of the cumulative effect of imprints.

Final Determination: The areas outside the Cross Mountain WSA are not likely to contain wilderness characteristics.

Diamond Breaks (outside WSA)

In its initial assessment in May, LSFO determined that wilderness characteristics are not likely to be present in this area outside of the WSA.

Comments received contend that BLM inventories identified several routes in the area, including Chokecherry Draw, Yellow Jacket Draw, Hoy Draw, Craig Draw, and Deerlick Draw. The WSA boundary includes all but the routes in Chokecherry Draw and Yellow Jacket Draw. The BLM's recommended boundary, as outlined in the BLM's October 1991 Wilderness Study Report, includes these remaining two routes with the unit.

While this is true, the road up Chokecherry was originally bladed and other routes in the area were maintained as fire breaks for fire complexes of 2000-2001. Moreover, the presence of the routes within the area detracts from the naturalness of the regions outside the WSA. Therefore, because of these imprints of man, the BLM has determined that these areas are not predominantly natural and are not likely to contain wilderness characteristics.

Final Determination: Areas outside the Diamond Breaks WSA are not likely to contain wilderness characteristics.

Yampa River

In May LSFO only looked at areas outside the current SRMA. Without including lands inside the SRMA, they are not larger than 5,000 acres. During this final determination, LSFO looked at the entire area to determine if wilderness characteristics were likely to exist in the areas.

Comments contend that the many routes in the area do not meet the definition of roads.

A roadless review was conducted in the area and a report was released November 23, 1998. Although much of the area was determined to be roadless, some of the area outside the SRMA was excluded because of the presence of roads.

Final Determination: The area determined to meet the criteria for roadlessness is likely to contain wilderness characteristics. Areas outside the roadless area are not likely to contain wilderness characteristics.

Pinyon Ridge (LSFO-managed portion only)

In its initial assessment in May, LSFO determined that wilderness characteristics are not likely to be present in this area.

Comments contend that the area is “relatively roadless,” and that the numerous ways in the area are not maintained, or regularly used, nor do they qualify as roads. However, LSFO maintains that the area is not predominately free of the hand of man because of the cumulative effect of imprints (many ways, reservoirs, fences, seismic trail).

Final Determination: The area is not likely to have wilderness characteristics.