

Wilderness Study Areas located on national forest system lands in MT

Provided by the US Forest Service at the request of MT legislative EQC

Big Snowies WSA:

General Description:

Comprised of approximately 91,000 acres and located on the Lewis and Clark National Forest just south of Lewistown, Montana the Big Snowies WSA was recommended to be managed as non-wilderness by the Forest Service in 1982.

Original Study Decision:

The Forest Service released their Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and study of the Big Snowies and Middle Fork Judith WSAs in 1982 in accordance with the Montana Wilderness Study Act. After extensive research and public input the Forest Service recommended the Big Snowies to be managed as nonwilderness stating:

“The Big Snowies contain 50 miles of road: 14 miles of primitive road and 36 miles of low standard road. Almost every stream bottom on the periphery has a road which penetrates into the study area for varying distances. Motorized recreation takes place on these roads and some trails... The past and present mineral activity for base and precious metals has been minimal. The southern half of the area has a potential for accumulation of oil and gas. The Forest Service recommends nonwilderness for the Big Snowies Study Area.”

Ongoing Forest Plan Revision:

The Draft Revised Forest Plan, and four alternatives were provided for public comment in fall 2018, three alternatives recommended designation, and two recommended non-designation (including the no action which is the current plan). . Alternatives that recommend designation are based on public input and justify it based upon the fact that motorized use is relatively limited, it is a large landscape with little development, and a unique land form with relatively inaccessible terrain. There is some grazing in the area, which could be authorized to continue if designated as Wilderness. The Forest Service received public comment for and against its recommendation.

Current Uses:

There are extensive trails for non-motorized recreation, including some use by the mountain biking community. There is some winter and non-winter motorized access within the WSA. Over snow vehicles are allowed in winter in two large open areas. Full size, UTVs, ATVs and motorcycles are allowed in non-winter on 3 designated routes, per the 2004 Travel Plan. There is no mining and vegetative management is minimal.

- Since the original study there has been a reduction in motorized use. Acres available to over snow vehicles have been reduced by approximately 60%, and motorized routes have been reduced from nine to three.

Blue Joint WSA:

General Description:

Comprised of approximately 61,000 acres and located on the Bitterroot National Forest just west of Darby, Montana the Blue Joint WSA was split into two pieces by the Forest Service in 1987 – 32,500 acres were recommended to be managed as non-wilderness, and 28,500 recommended to add to the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. The portion recommended for wilderness is the Blue Joint Drainage, entirely enclosed by

high ridges. There was a road that existed in the 80s in the front of the drainage and there was existing trail riding, snowmobiling, and trail clearing with a chainsaw (nonwilderness uses).

Original Study Decision:

The Forest Service released their Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and study of the Blue Joint WSA in 1987 in accordance with the Montana Wilderness Study Act. After extensive research and public input the Forest Service recommended the Blue Joint to be split and with part added to the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness and the remaining to be managed as non-wilderness stating:

“The Blue Joint drainage is entirely enclosed by high ridges offering outstanding solitude. Primitive recreation opportunities include hiking, big- and small-game hunting, fishing, and viewing a moderate diversity of vegetation and wildlife. Seventy-five percent of the boundary is well-defined by topographic features, the remainder is mid-slope either passing through or immediately above roads and development.”

Forest Plan Revision:

The Bitterroot Forest Plan revision is not currently scheduled, but may begin in 2021. The current Forest Plan provides management area direction to protect the wilderness character of the area.

Current Uses:

No motorized or mechanized travel, including over snow, allowed per the 2016 Bitterroot Travel Plan. There are minimal existing roads. There are 11 active mines, as well as minimal vegetation management activities. There are 1172 acres open for livestock grazing and 44, 089 acres suitable for timber management. There is 1 utility corridor and high mineral potential.

- Prior to the 2016 Bitterroot travel Plan the area was open to motorized/mechanized activities including 10 trails totaling 63 miles for OHVs and mountain bikes, 64,000 acres open to snowmobiles.

Middle Fork Judith WSA:

General Description:

Comprised of approximately 81,000 acres and located on the Lewis and Clark National Forest just south of Stanford, Montana, the Middle Fork Judith WSA was recommended to be managed as nonwilderness by the Forest Service in 1982 and 1986. Instead, it recommends managing for primitive recreation, wildlife management, and development/timber management along Harrison Creek drainage.

Original Study Decision:

The Forest Service released their Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and study of the Big Snowies and Middle Fork Judith WSAs in 1982 in accordance with the Montana Wilderness Study Act. After extensive research and public input the Forest Service recommended the Middle Fork Judith to be managed as nonwilderness stating:

“The Middles Fork Judith contains 64 miles of road: 52 miles of primitive road and 12 miles of low standard road. Motorized recreation takes place throughout the area... The area contains 461 million board feet of timber. Site productivity is average when compared to other sites on the Forest. The areas most suitable for timber management are in the upper basins of the middle Fork and Lost Fork. There are approximately 150 prospects and mines within the study area. The famed yogo sapphire deposit lies partially in the study area. Evidence indicates that lead, silver, and molybdenite exist in quantity, but at long distances from milling sites. The Forest Service recommends nonwilderness for the Middle Fork Judith Study Area.

Ongoing Forest Plan Revision:

The Draft Revised Forest Plan, and four alternatives were provided for public comment in fall 2018, one

alternative recommended designation and four recommended non-designation (including the no action alternative which is the current forest plan). The alternatives that recommends designation is based on public input and justifies it based upon the fact that the majority of the area is very natural appearing, undeveloped and not affected by human intervention. The Forest Service received public comment for and against its recommendation.

Current Uses:

There are extensive trails for non- motorized and a few for motorized (3 miles motorcycle trails, 10 miles of ATV trails, and 15 miles suitable for passage by a pickup truck) recreation. There is both winter and non-winter motorized access in the WSA. Snowmobiles are allowed on a designated route to private inholdings (9 miles). Full size, UTVs, ATVs and motorcycles are allowed on a designated route to private inholdings (9 miles). There is also one motorcycle trail accessing the private inholdings (July 1 – Aug 31). One trail allows ATVs and motorcycles (July 1 – Aug 31) and one route allows full size, UTVs, ATVs and motorcycles per 2007 Travel Management Plan. There is no mining and vegetative management is minimal, though FS recommends nearly 1 million board feet of harvest per year for fuels management and to help maintain early successional habitat for elk. The FS recommends at least 981 acres suitable for livestock grazing.

- Since the original study there has been a reduction in the number of motorized routes (mainly motorcycle) and restricted season of use within the WSA.

Sapphire WSA:

General Description:

Comprised of approximately 94,000 acres and located on the Bitterroot and the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forests just southeast of Hamilton, Montana, the Sapphire WSA was recommended to be managed as non-wilderness (evidence of historic mining, several roads, and dams on trout and kent lakes, evidence of domestic sheep use).

Original Study Decision:

The Forest Service released their Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and study of the Sapphire WSA in 1987 in accordance with the Montana Wilderness Study Act. After extensive research and public input the Forest Service recommended the Sapphire to be managed as non-wilderness stating:

“The roadless area retains a high degree of naturalness, however some impacts are evident. Mining activity is visible on 250 acres of private land. Fire lines and primitive roads are evident in Martin Creek as are several other roads within the exterior boundary ... Primitive recreation opportunities include hiking, horseback riding, big- and small-game hunting, fishing, and viewing a moderate diversity of vegetation, wildlife and historic mining. Most of the boundary is poorly defined by topography, lying mid-slope immediately above roads and development.”

Forest Plan Revision:

The Bitterroot Forest Plan revision is not currently scheduled, but may begin in 2020 and the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Forest Plan Revision was completed in 2009. Both of the current Forest Plans provide management area direction to protect the wilderness character of the area, but recommend a non-wilderness designation.

Current Uses:

Bitterroot NF: No motorized or mechanized travel, including over snow, allowed per the 2016 Bitterroot Travel Plan. There are active mines, as well as minimal vegetation management activities. 25,864 acres are open to

grazing and there are 71,224 acres suitable for timber management. There is 1 utility corridor and high mineral potential.

- Prior to the 2016 Bitterroot Travel Plan the area was open to motorized/mechanized activities including 20 trails totaling 41 miles for OHVs and mountain bikes in Bitterroot portion as well as 37,500 acres open to snowmobiles.

Beaverhead-Deerlodge NF: Maintain semi-primitive recreation setting with predominantly natural appearing scenery. Summer non-motorized trails and a few miles of motorized trails are provided including portions of Trail #313. The semi-primitive motorized setting is based on motorized use existence prior to 1977. Big game hunting and snowmobiling, particularly around Frog Pond

Basin, are popular. The entire management area is a fish key watershed important for bull trout habitat.

Vegetation is managed through prescribed and natural fire. Other ecosystem components are regulated by natural processes and events.

West Pioneer WSA:

General Description:

Comprising of approximately 152,000 acres and located on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest just east of Wisdom, Montana the West Pioneer WSA was recommended to be managed as non-wilderness by the Forest Service as a part of the 1981 Forest Plan. Actions taken to facilitate motorized use in the area since the 1977 Act were litigated by Montana Wilderness Association and later upheld in Court.

Original Study Decision:

The Forest Service released their Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and study of the West Pioneer WSA in 1979 in accordance with the Montana Wilderness Study Act. After extensive research and public input the Forest Service recommended the West Pioneer to be managed as nonwilderness stating:

“Although the West Pioneer area possesses high wilderness characteristics as expressed by the wilderness Attribute Rating System, it has been assessed...as not contributing significantly to the National Wilderness Preservation System... The West Pioneer area has been determined to contain a high molybdenum reserve with a present net worth of \$36.9 million... The [nonwilderness designation] will permit the greatest dispersed motorized recreation use, primarily snowmobile use... It provides an opportunity for both roaded and roadless forms of primitive recreation activity. About 45 percent of the study area will likely remain essentially roadless and be available for primitive recreation.”

The Forest Service held up this position in its 1981 and 2009 National Forest Plan.

Recent Forest Plan Revision:

The 2009 Land Resource Management Plan, has recommended the West Pioneer WSA for non-wilderness designation.

Current Uses:

The area provides a semi-primitive recreation setting in summer and winter. Hunting, stock and OHV use on trails are the most common activities. Popular snowmobile trails connect the Big Hole Valley through the Warm Springs area to the Scenic Byway. Vegetation is managed primarily through prescribed and natural fire. Doolittle and Squaw Creek are fisheries key watersheds managed to conserve native fish populations.

Ten Lakes WSA

General Description:

Comprised of approximately 34,000 acres and located on the Kootenai National Forest and is northeast of Libby, Montana.

Original Study Decision:

The Forest Service released the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and study of the Ten Lakes WSA in 1985 in accordance with the Montana Wilderness Study Act. After extensive research and public input the Forest Service made the following recommendation for Ten Lakes:

“This Final Report and Proposal includes a wilderness recommendation on 26,000 acres of the Ten Lakes Montana Wilderness Study Act area, located in northwestern Montana astride the Whitefish Mountain Range, bordered by Canada to the north. The remaining 8,200 acres of the 34,200 acre area are recommended for nonwilderness designation including roadless management (5,300 acres) and developmental designation with activities that favor wildlife. The recommendation is based upon 8 years of study, analysis, and evaluation of public comments and follows the public review of the Draft Report and Proposal released in November 1982.”

Recent Forest Plan Revision:

The 2013 draft record of decision for the land management plan did not recommend the Ten Lakes WSA for wilderness designation. Based on objections from several parties and the ongoing site-specific travel management planning for the area per a 2007 litigation settlement agreement, the 2015 final record of decision and forest plan defers the recommendation to the 1985 Ten Lakes MWSA Final Report and Proposal.

Current Uses:

The Ten Lakes area provides forest users a variety of recreation opportunities from developed campgrounds to dispersed, remote, backcountry opportunities. Recreation users (including hikers, mountain bikers and snowmobilers) access the higher peaks and ridges for the challenge of doing so and for the views those locations provide. All trails are open to hiking, stock, and mechanized use (mountain biking). Hiking is the dominant use, followed by stock. Trails within the WSA that are popular bicycle loop trails are shared with hikers and horse riders.

Snowmobiling, snow-shoeing, and dog sledding, as well as back-country and cross-country skiing, are winter uses within the WSA. The entire project area is open to over-snow motorized use (2016 Ten Lakes Travel Management DEIS).

Hyalite-Porcupine-Buffalo Horn Wilderness Study Area

General Description:

Comprised of approximately 151,000 acres and located on the Custer Gallatin National Forest and is south of Bozeman, Montana. This area is located in the core of the Gallatin Range, running north to Hyalite Canyon and south to the Yellowstone National Park boundary. WSA was recommended to be managed as non-wilderness by the Forest Service as a part of the 1987 Forest Plan. Actions taken to facilitate motorized use in the area since the 1977 Act were litigated by Montana Wilderness Association and later upheld in Court. Actions taken to facilitate motorized use in the area since the 1977 Act were litigated by Montana Wilderness Association and later upheld in Court.

Original Study Decision:

The Forest Service released the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and study of the Hyalite Porcupine Buffalo Horn WSA in 1985 in accordance with the Montana Wilderness Study Act. After extensive research and public input as part of the Gallatin National Forest Plan in 1987, the Forest Service made the following recommendation for the area:

“I am not recommending this area for wilderness classification because I believe the following management which has been analyzed in the Hyalite-Porcupine_Buffalo Horn Study best serves the public. ...

Most of the area will remain unroaded to maintain its dispersed recreation and wildlife qualities. Until Congress determines otherwise, this Montana Wilderness Study Act area will be managed, subject to existing rights and uses, to maintain its existing wilderness character and potential for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. Therefore, no timber harvest, road construction, or other development will occur until Congress acts.”

Ongoing Forest Plan Revision:

The Draft Revised Forest Plan, and four alternatives were provided for public comment in spring 2019, two alternatives recommended varying portions of the WSA for designation or non-designation, one recommended designation for the whole WSA, and two recommended non-designation for the whole WSA (this includes the no action alternative which is the current forest plan).

Alternatives that recommend designation are based on public input and justify it based upon the fact that the majority of the area is very natural appearing, undeveloped and not affected by human intervention. There is some grazing in the area, which could be authorized to continue if designated as Wilderness.

The Forest Service received public comment for and against its recommendation.

Current Uses:

The 1985 Hyalite-Porcupine-Buffalo Horn Wilderness Study Report indicated that visitor uses primarily included hiking, camping, hunting, snowmobiling, motorcycle riding, horseback riding, collecting specimens from the Gallatin Petrified Forest, and cross-country skiing (USDA Forest Service 1985). Big game hunting, trout and grayling fishing, and activities provided by outfitters, guides, and dude ranches were also popular. By 2003, Hyalite-Porcupine-Buffalo Horn Wilderness Study Area recreation uses had shifted, mirroring changes seen elsewhere on the Gallatin National Forest and in the Northern Rockies. Combined with population increases in Gallatin and Park Counties, this shift resulted in notable increases in mountain biking, motorcycle and ATV use, snowmobiling, and ice climbing (Schlenker 2003, 2012).