

# The BLM Wilderness Review

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Wilderness area selection and management is currently one of the most controversial issues in public land management. The many Western ranchers holding BLM grazing permits should take an interest in the agency's wilderness review mandated by the 1976 Organic Act, as the eventual management changes will affect ranchers, the Bureau, and public alike. Today is the best time to become involved, while the BLM's wilderness goals and criteria are fresh and relatively open to change. Hopefully, a new approach can avoid the problems that plague the Forest Service's "RARE" reviews (Roadless Area Review and Evaluation).

One cannot envy the legal responsibility of government agencies to develop specific regulations to implement legislation that is both vague and naive. The 1964 Wilderness Act does not go far as we would like in specifying what wilderness is and how to manage it. No federal agency has translated the language of the 1964 act into measurable, debatable terms in either the biological or outdoor recreation fields, and progress toward that goal is not apparent. A 1978 Forest Service economic study was the first agency attempt to consider the tradeoffs between roadless area management and timber harvesting. Yet the wilderness vs. timber harvesting issue has been a major policy question and controversy since the 1950's.

## Wilderness Controversy

Because the world "wilderness" has such different meanings to different groups, the debate among these interest groups results in little communication and less compromise. At best it provides a smoke screen, allowing the agency to chart a temporarily safe escape. The original legislation is not understood by the public. The situation is made more complex by social changes that have occurred since the Wilderness Act passed in 1964. For example, demand by urbanites for undeveloped recreation and solitude has grown tremendously, encouraging federal identification and protection of remaining roadless areas. The recent movement toward limiting federal controls, or transferring them to local government (especially in some western states), opposes wilderness zoning on federal lands as a loss of local development options.

In the middle of this confusion, ranchers as a group have much to gain or lose on this issue. In some areas wilderness could protect the grazing resource from destruction by mechanized recreation or mineral development, reduce poaching and vandalism problems associated with motor vehicles, enhance the ranchers' image, and in other ways protect the life style that ranchers desire. Conversely, wilderness designation could result in cutbacks in range improvements, increased recreation, adverse publicity and new political enemies. Ranchers need first to learn the laws of wilderness area selection and management before they can decide whether wilderness designation would hurt or help their long term interests. In this article we hope to

raise the level of debate away from emotion towards substantive issues. Let's begin with a brief analysis of the events leading up to the present situation.

## Goals of Wilderness Management

What was the intent of the 1964 Wilderness Act? It correctly saw the eventual disappearance of unharvested or unutilized land due to pressures of increasing population and economic development. Its solution was permanent "rezoning" of selected federal lands into nonconsumptive use that left them effectively unaltered from presettlement conditions. Why bother to do this? The Wilderness Act identifies two major areas of wilderness benefit to our society. The first can be classified as social-esthetic benefits; namely, the recreation, scenic, and cultural effects that wildlands have had in the development of the American character in the past and hopefully the future. Vague references to these types of benefits constitute much of the language of the act, and agency thinking has recognized only this concept of wilderness. A second type of social benefit from wilderness is mentioned less, but we believe it to be at least as important in the long run. These are the objective scientific or information values of landforms and biological features unaffected by man. Research to improve our knowledge of natural processes in biology and other fields requires reference areas where natural processes are unaffected by human development. For example, most rangeland is inventoried and managed by some classification of inferred vegetation climax, i.e. SCS range site, Forest Service habitat type, etc. To set up, use, and improve such a classification, relict areas of presettlement vegetation are needed as references. Plant succession and competition need to be studied with and without domestic grazing, and natural fire behavior has to be observed and studied without fire controls. Such activities are part of the reason to set aside a system of wilderness areas or natural reserves. To lose forever the unique information contained in the few such remaining areas is to leave the range management profession poorer in the long run. Unfortunately, very few agency people interpreting or implementing the act recognize the value of this information resource, or use it to evaluate potential areas.

Why was a federal law passed to establish wilderness status when the USFS had in-house procedures for naming wild and primitive areas? The BLM Organic Act included a wilderness provision although the Bureau managed primitive areas. Part of the reason was a trend toward centralized control. Conservationists preferred the more permanent legal protection of Congress over an easily reversed agency decision. However, one compromise necessary to pass the Wilderness Act requires Congressional, not just presidential approval for final wilderness designation. As a result, for the permanent Congressional protection of designated wilderness status, an area must have the support of the managing agency and the local populace before the bill stands any chance of being approved by Congress and the President. Many western wilderness areas have failed to pass Congress because of local opposition. Considering the

political demand for wilderness, it is likely that alternative forms of wilderness protection will emerge to circumvent the Congressional bottleneck in authorizing areas.

### Grazing in Wilderness Areas

Many misconceptions exist as to what activities wilderness designation allows or excludes. Existing livestock grazing is specifically allowed to continue after wilderness designation, subject to "reasonable regulations as are deemed necessary by the Secretary of Agriculture." Reported grazing cutbacks in wilderness areas are not a legal consequence of wilderness designation, but decisions of local agency officials who have felt that grazing conflicts with (undefined) wilderness values. In these decisions, the burden of proof should be on the agency. While future fencing developments would be prohibited, large utility-type installations can receive a presidential variance, which might apply to types of small water projects. Traditional motorized air and water transport can continue in/over wilderness areas, and private inholdings in wilderness areas can be driven to. Developed springs and fences can continue to be maintained. Mining claims made before December 31, 1983, can be worked after that date, but claims cannot be filed later. Forest and range fires and other emergencies can be handled with aircraft or other equipment. In general, wilderness designation prohibits construction of further roads or improvements, permanent habitation, and private use of motor vehicles. Wilderness designation does not require subsequent compliance with Class I air quality standards—this question is decided at the state level. In summary, present wilderness laws are not as unsympathetic to existing grazing as many ranchers believe. Certain aspects of wilderness management, such as the return to natural fire frequency, could do much to improve the forage base.

Conversely, does continued grazing decrease wilderness quality? Again, it is useful to separate the psychological and scientific values of wilderness areas. While cattle can degrade trout habitat in narrow streams, most antigrazing sentiments are from urban wilderness users who equate use with damage. Most of this potential conflict could be avoided through information and education. Grazing can be compatible with the role of wilderness areas in biological conservation. Above certain stocking rates, domestic grazing has a different selective effect on the plant community than the native grazing it replaces or adds to. However, restoration of natural fire would do as much or more than elimination of grazing to preserve presettlement vegetation still extant. Wilderness areas have an intermediate role in biological conservation: Research natural areas and national parks are more single-use conservation areas, while multiple-use public lands have the least value as scientific reference areas. In short, well-managed domestic grazing can be compatible with high wilderness quality.

### Trends Affecting the Review

Due to the increasing demand for solitude and wilderness recreation, and the decreasing supply of roadless wildlands, federal legislators (representing mostly urban population) have been relaxing the standards for wilderness designation. Conservationists have succeeded in rewriting minimum area requirements and the definition of "roadless," for reasons given above and also because they felt deserving areas were unjustly excluded on arbitrary or deceptive criteria during the first RARE review. As mentioned before, this movement for more wilderness areas is countered by local opposition to increased restrictions

on the use of public lands.

Conservationists' objections to RARE I were incorporated in more specific Congressional instructions as to how the BLM wilderness review was to be conducted. The House-Senate conference committee (of the Federal Land Management and Policy Act [FLMPA]) defined "road" as one maintained and constructed, not just kept open by traffic. This change greatly expanded the area eligible for wilderness classification. The FLMPA also requires BLM to report to Congress on all areas considered for wilderness but rejected, stating why they were rejected. This is in marked contrast to the original Wilderness Act. The law also requires interim multiple use management to avoid damaging the wilderness values of areas being considered.

### Revised Procedure

In March 1978, the draft of the BLM wilderness review procedure was made available for public comment. The review criteria and process were published in final form in December, 1978. The review procedure includes three stages—the first, called "wilderness inventory," identifies roadless areas suitable for study. The Bureau plans to complete this first stage by July, 1980. All BLM primitive or natural areas are automatically considered for study, and as a group are evaluated on a faster timetable. The second stage in the process, called "wilderness study," considers all resources in the area. The study results and agency recommendations are reported to the President as the third and final stage. Recommendations on existing BLM primitive and natural areas are scheduled to be reported by July of 1980, with final recommendations on all other wilderness study areas scheduled by October, 1991.

While the timetable for the review is clear, the criteria used to rate individual areas are not. At the beginning of this article, we mentioned the two main concepts defining wilderness in the 1964 act. Objective, or at least more refined measures need to be developed in these areas before a wilderness review fulfills the legal intent. For example, we are capable of assessing biologically whether a landscape is close to presettlement conditions, "...retaining its primaevial character and influence. . . [a landscape] which generally appears [to the trained eye] to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable." A proper evaluation of a prospective wilderness area would study references on presettlement vegetation and animal communities and compare present conditions to the inferred presettlement conditions. Areas disturbed should be evaluated for potential recovery. BLM should apply recent developments in ecological theory to wilderness evaluation and management. For example, island biogeography concepts, such as size of the area relative to size of disturbances, and proximity of other refuges are relevant. Potential rare and endangered species should affect evaluation, as should other resource values unique to the area (minerals, geologic, historical, etc.). Presently, BLM intends to evaluate the "naturalness" of areas by a brief visual inspection by outdoor recreation planners. The most specific criteria of naturalness in the March 1978 draft would exclude an area showing major, man-made structural changes in the plant community (i.e. logging, chaining). In terms of biological conservation, a wilderness review should answer the question, "What biological information is contained in this area, and how does it compare in value with information in any similar areas already protected?" The Bureau's present staff are not adequately trained to answer these questions.

Regarding the social-esthetic purpose of the wilderness act, what is a wilderness experience? How is it measured? How is a landscape evaluated for supplying the social values of wilderness? What is carrying capacity (productivity)? How well can this landscape be managed for this resource? These are questions a wilderness study should address, in addition to the more traditional, tangible resources involved, such as timber, minerals, water, etc.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, we can suggest several perspectives to help the rancher protect his interests should he become involved in the BLM wilderness review. In such an emotional issue, ranchers should consider their long-term interests in the light of long-term political and economic trends. If ranchers desire a stable, rural lifestyle at low population densities, this land-use goal is closer to those of traditional wilderness advocates than development interests such as mining or tourism and real estate. Thus, in areas facing eventual development, an earlier compromise with wilderness advocates may give the rancher more or better concessions than later zoning struggles in local government.

In any event, people concerned with public lands need to read the appropriate laws and understand their intent. Only then can they separate administrative preferences from legal requirements (i.e. the case of grazing cutbacks). It is in the ranchers'

interest not to express their desires in general philosophical or emotional terms, but as specifically as possible to other groups who may not understand a rancher's perspective. For example, "Inability to develop water improvement A would cost me B dollars over the next 10 years", provides a better basis for negotiation and compromise than a speech on the unfairness of federal land policies. Similarly, all public land users should expect and encourage the BLM and other agencies to make better progress toward specific, objective criteria for the biological, recreational, cultural, and economic aspects of wilderness review, as discussed before. For any groups unhappy with the BLM wilderness plans, their strongest case (through any branch of government) is to demonstrate the wilderness inventory was deficient for the specific area in question, either by insufficient or incorrect information on the area, or by inappropriate review criteria.

How biologically important is wilderness protection for the area in question? How suitable is it for wilderness recreation? What would be the economic and social effects of different courses of action? Unfortunately, the BLM is presently too unsophisticated and under-funded to thoroughly answer all these questions. Thus, one role of interest groups or individuals is to gather better data relevant to agreed-upon criteria. Considering our lack of sophistication in the topic of wilderness evaluation and management, obtaining better information is not difficult, and it truly serves the public interest. ●

A comprehensive summary of current research on grassland ecosystem structure

# Perspectives in Grassland Ecology

Edited by **N.R. French**, Natural Resources Ecology Laboratory,  
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Representing the work of scientists in the western United States, Canada, Mexico, and other parts of the world, *Perspectives in Grassland Ecology* summarizes extensive data obtained from the Grassland Biome program, one of the major integrated research efforts conducted under the US/IBP. The book examines biomass structure by 1) comparing North American grasslands with other grasslands of the world, 2) comparing trophic structure in different grassland types, and 3) describing modifications to structure that occur when water and nutrients are made available artificially. Both the significance of driving variables and the major functional aspects of primary production are discussed in a modeling framework. Contributors also compare the importance of aboveground and belowground production and consumption in different grassland types and provide a summary of the most important driving variables and processes in grasslands.



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