

# Badlands on the Brink! Is Wilderness Designation the Answer?

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North Dakota is the seventeenth largest state covering 70,665 sq. miles. We are an agricultural based state growing everything from soybeans, potatoes and sugarbeets in the fertile Red River Valley to wheat and barley in the central part of the state. Sheep and cattle are in the far west portion of the state.

It's the western part of the state that is embroiled in controversy. It pits the cattle and petroleum producers against the preservationists. The preservationists want to take 191,000 acres of public North Dakota range land and designate it for wilderness protection. The pro-wilderness groups have written a proposal for these lands called: "Badlands on the Brink".

Myself and several other North Dakotans feel this proposal is not the best idea for these lands. There is the threat of regulations on grazing levels and recreational uses and the oil and gas exploration could be completely aborted. The western part of our state is known for its large ranches and oil production. Even slight limitations on a few acres would be detrimental to these areas and the state.

Everyone has an idea of what our state looked like four hundred years ago. I see North Dakota in the past as a flat treeless area, winding rivers, waist high grass and buffalo herds. Today, North Dakota is crisscrossed by roads, grain and oil fields, inhabited by small towns, civilized with power lines and viewed from airplanes. However, there are lands in Western North Dakota that are virtually uninhabited by humans. These lands are grazed by cattle and sheep, hunted, and explored for the earth's riches. These are the lands the preservationists want to designate for wilderness protection.

Using National parks for recreation sparked the whole idea of wilderness designation. In 1964 Congress passed the **Wilderness Act**. The Act establishes a preservation system that is shaped by federally owned lands set aside by Congress as wilderness. These lands will be regulated in a way that will leave them natural and undamaged for future generations.

The first question you should be wondering is: What is a wilderness? The **Wilderness Act** interprets a wilderness to be:

Undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements

or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which 1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable; 2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; 3) has at least 5,000 acres or is of sufficient size as to make practical its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition AND 4) may also contain ecological, geological, or features of scientific, educational, scenic or historical value.

Since the establishment of this Act, almost every state has implemented some sort of wilderness system on their Federal Forest Service land. North Dakota is one of three states that has not implemented a wilderness system to date, but there are 191,000 acres being studied for designation. These acres are split into thirteen different units regulated by the Forest Service in a multiple use system. Currently grazing and range improvements are permitted on all thirteen units. According to Wayde Schafer, Chairman of the Teddy Roosevelt Group of the Sierra Club, who is referring to the establishment of the pro-wilderness proposal, "There is nothing to indicate grazing won't continue... there will be some reductions in grazing." Mr. Schafer doesn't go on to say what those reduction will be. He only states "...reasonable regulations designed to protect wilderness." It's not clearly stated what is reasonable nor who will decide the reasonability.

Another obstacle ranchers face is the limitations placed on grazing levels. They may only be increased if it has no adverse impact on wilderness values. The development and repair of fences may only be done if it is aimed at protecting resources. Probably the largest obstacle ranchers face is the fact that motorized vehicle travel could be stopped. This would greatly complicate a rancher's work. The expense of using horse to replace the pickup is tremendous.

As stated before, there is extensive oil drilling on these lands. Seven of the thirteen units already have wells on them and one unit is on the drawing board. Currently there are 675 producing wells with 500 more wells expected in the next ten years. These oil sights pump millions of dollars into the State's revenue. In 1992 our State collected more than \$22 million in tax monies, the majority of this money was spent on education. To eliminate future wells would adversely affect our State's economy, not to mention the

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small towns that are kept afloat by oil.

The Sierra Club states that "these areas have the least oil and gas potential and would have been drilled years ago if there was significant oil located there." This is true, but across the world readily available sources of oil are being depleted. We need alternative sources and Western North Dakota is one.

Along with these controls is the introduction of non-native plant species to the rangeland. The proposal blames improper managing of livestock grazing for these introductions. Truth be told, the invasion of many non-native plant species can occur at any time. Two of these in North Dakota are crested wheatgrass and leafy spurge.

The Highway Department plants crested wheatgrass in the road ditches. It then spreads to surrounding lands. Leafy spurge is a nasty little monster, classified as a noxious weed. It takes a few plants and you have a spurge forest. There would be no chemical treatments allowed, which is the only sure way to control spurge. In time these two introduced plants, can choke out any native grasses or endangered plant species. There is nothing natural about them.

What are the reductions on grazing going to be? Who decides the reasonability? What would North Dakota do without the tax monies from oil drilling? How can lands overrun with non-native plants or covered with the yellowish tint of spurge be considered "land retaining its primeval character" as is required by the Act?

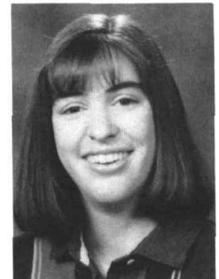
These are a few questions North Dakota must have answered but most importantly is: "Do these lands meet the purity requirements established in the **Wilderness Act of 1964?**"

Lowell Ridgeway, director of the North Dakota Petroleum Council, states in his editorial to the Fargo forum on February 6, 1994, "Of the 191,000 acres being studied none of the lands, except for the Twin Buttes unit, qualify for designation as defined in the Act of 1964."

Wilderness designation is a good idea but if the North Dakota proposal is passed as it is now and the questions are not answered, I can foresee a fall in our state's economy and the extinction of America's most endangered species-the small town.

## "Brush Management: One Families Solution."

Lindi Clayton  
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North Central Texas is a great place to live. If you are in the ranching business in this area, you are also probably in the brush business, too. Fifty six million acres of Texas rangelands are infested with brush.

My family is in the cow-calf business. We operate three ranches northwest of Fort Worth. The ranch that I will be focusing on was purchased by my great grandfather in 1935 and has been in our family for three generations. Various types of brush management have been carried out over the years ranging from oiling mesquite with kerosene, cutting and piling prickly pear, to mechanical grubbing of mesquite.

My cousin, Tom Howorth, now owns the ranch. With help from my Dad and Uncle, who operate the ranch, it was decided the time had come to wage war on the brush. With help from the local Soil Conservation Service, a conservation plan to manage the brush was developed.

The brush that needed to be managed were prickly pear, mesquite, lotebush, and tasajillo, sometimes called jumping cactus or scatter cactus because its leaves break off easily and fly everywhere when ran into. In several areas of the ranch the brush was so thick cattle would not graze even if there was fresh grass. In other areas prickly pear almost completely covered the ground. The competition between the grass and the brush was being won by the brush. My Dad said he was tired of not being able to ride horseback through the pastures, because the brush was so thick. He also said he was tired of cattle eating prickly pear, getting sore mouths, and drying up to nothing but skin and bones. We knew that it was time to do something.

My family felt they had four alternatives to help manage the brush.

1). We could do nothing. Just sit back and let the brush take over. This was not acceptable. We felt the brush canopy had to be reduced to operate the ranch the way we wanted.

2). Mechanical grubbing would be very effective on the mesquite, but it would only spread the prickly pear, and On

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