

PUEBLO MOUNTAINS WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 72,690 acres

The Pueblo Mountains WSA OR-2-81/NV-020-642 is located 96 miles south of Burns and 5 miles south of Fields, Oregon. The WSA is an irregularly shaped area containing 72,690 acres of public land, including 600 acres in Nevada. This total includes 3,380 acres of split-estate lands in Oregon. Almost all of the area is within Harney County, although a small portion crosses the state line into Humboldt County, Nevada. The entire study area lies to the west of the main north-south county road which runs between Fields and Denio, Nevada. The nearest major highway is Nevada State Highway 140, 4 miles to the south of the WSA.

At the extremes, the area is 15 miles long and 11 miles wide. The boundary is formed by a combination of private land, BLM dirt roads, a paved county road (east side only), and legal subdivisions. The most prominent physical feature of the study area is the Pueblo Mountains ridgeline which runs north and south along the entire length of the western half of the WSA. This is a tilted fault block mountain range, the eastern side of which has been uplifted along a north-south trending fault. Averaging 7,300 feet in elevation along the crest, the eastern face of this ridge is steep, rugged and rocky while much of the western slope is like a table top tilted to the west at nearly a 45-degree angle. Less than 3 miles east of the western ridge lies a shorter (9-mile-long) north-south ridgeline. Along this ridgeline is Pueblo Mountain. At 8,634 feet, it is the second highest peak in southeastern Oregon and the highest point in the study area.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE

The recommendation for this WSA is to designate 26,150 acres as wilderness and release 46,654 acres for uses other than wilderness. The area recommended for wilderness is basically the core of the study area. It contains the highest quality wilderness values and special features within a unit capable of being managed to preserve these qualities. It is natural in appearance and has outstanding opportunities for solitude due to its enclosure by rugged ridgelines with steep escarpments and the deeply incised drainages frequently vegetated with quaking aspen, cottonwood, Mormon tea and other screening brush species. It can support a variety of high quality primitive types of recreation such as backpacking, horseback riding, upland game hunting and scenic and wildlife photography. Its numerous special wilderness features include high mountain ridges and meadows, habitat for a resident population of bighorn sheep (a candidate for Federal listing under the Endangered Species Act), interesting geologic features (such as the enormous westward tilted Steens-Pueblo fault block which represents the northernmost extension from Nevada of this Basin and Range type of structure), outstanding scenic vistas and a number of special interest plants (including a candidate for Federal listing as threatened or endangered).

The recommendation would allow the development of silver, mercury and gold from two projected mines in the portion of the WSA not recommended for wilderness.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The Pueblo Mountains WSA is in a natural condition. The unnatural developments of the WSA are not substantially noticeable within the study area as a whole due to the steep topography of much of the WSA.

Unnatural developments within the study area include six reservoirs, six developed springs, three fences totaling 4 miles, 33 miles of vehicle ways, 18 areas of past mining activity, one powerline totaling 4 miles, four ditches totaling 4 miles, one cemetery and two dumps. Generally, the developments are scattered, screened by the topography, and can be seen from only small localized areas. Approximately 4 percent of the study area is influenced by these features.

California bighorn sheep were released in the Pueblo Mountains in 1976, 1980 and 1983 by ODFW. The good interspersed water, forage and thermal cover provides good summer range for both mule deer and antelope. The eastern and western slopes of the WSA are crucial deer winter range. Chukars, sage grouse and valley quail can be found in the study area.

Whitehorse cutthroat trout, a candidate for Federal listing as threatened or endangered, were released in Van Horn Creek and Denio Creek in 1976 and 1980. They have become established in 2.5 miles of Van Horn Creek and 0.2 mile of Denio Creek.

B. Solitude: Pueblo Mountains WSA has outstanding opportunities for solitude due to the large size, configuration and topography of the area. The Pueblo Mountains' diverse landscape includes rugged ridges with steep escarpments, high-elevation basins and meadows, and deeply cut drainages. Vegetative screening, sufficient to enhance solitude, is limited to portions of the drainages, meadows and spring areas.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: Outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined types of recreation in the Pueblo Mountains WSA include day hiking, backpacking, hunting, horseback riding, sightseeing, wildlife viewing and photography.

Opportunities for hunting and viewing wildlife are also available within the study area. Mule deer and upland game birds (chukar, quail and dove) are the most commonly hunted species, while numerous nongame types of wildlife are frequently visible throughout the area.

Winding through the central portion of the study area for 11 miles is the Pueblo Mountain segment of the Desert Trail. The trail has been marked and designated in the Pueblo Mountains through a cooperative venture between Desert Trail Association (a private organization), the Parks and Recreation Division of the State of Oregon, and BLM. BLM and the Desert Trail Association have joined in a Cooperative Management Agreement (CMA) to share responsibilities for maintaining this portion of the trail and developing other portions. The trail is part of the Oregon State Recreation Trails System.

D. Special Features: Among the special features is the enormous westward-tilted fault block, of which the Pueblo Mountains form the southern part. This is an impressive example of the Basin and Range type of structure which covers much of Nevada. It is characterized by a series of parallel fault blocks forming elongated mountain ranges and broad, intervening valleys. The Steens-Pueblo fault block represents the northernmost extension of this type of structure. Another interesting geological feature is the pre-Tertiary rocks in the southern part of the WSA which are exposed along the eastern front of the block. Except for a small outcrop in the Trout Creek Mountains, these are the only rocks of their kind in southeastern Oregon and are the oldest as well.

The presence of bighorn sheep, a candidate for Federal listing under the Endangered Species Act, and the presence of sage grouse, also a candidate for Federal listing under the Endangered Species Act, and crucial deer and antelope winter range makes wildlife values a special feature of the WSA. The Whitehorse cutthroat trout, another candidate for Federal listing under the Endangered Species Act, has been restocked into its assumed native habitat in Van Horn Creek. This species is found only in a few streams other than Van Horn Creek and Denio Creek in the Pueblo Mountains. The Alvord chub, an Oregon Species of Special Concern, as listed in the Oregon Natural Heritage Database, can be found throughout the WSA.

The outstanding scenery of the study area is another special feature.

4. MANAGEABILITY

The portion of the Pueblo Mountains WSA recommended for wilderness designation can be managed as wilderness to preserve values present in the area. The proposed action is a new alternative designed to reconcile major conflicting concerns and permit acceptable multiple uses. In this alternative, manageability

would be enhanced by excluding approximately 2,215 acres of private land, not closing 4 miles of roads and 22.25 miles of ways which would be difficult to enforce, and by placing the boundary at a higher elevation on the west and south sides of the area. Vehicles would be unable to enter the remainder of the WSA because of steep terrain.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

The northern part of the WSA is within an area that has been nominated as an Area of Critical Mineral Potential (ACMP) and is considered to have potential for the occurrence of gold and mercury.

The eastern and southeastern portions of the study area have moderate potential for the occurrence of geothermal resources. Oil and gas resources have low potential for occurrence. As of October 16, 1987, there were no geothermal or oil and gas leases in the Pueblo Mountains WSA.

Based on abundant direct evidence, a large portion of the WSA has a high potential for occurrence of copper, gold, mercury, molybdenum and silver. A smaller area in the northeastern area of the WSA containing rocks adjacent to the Pueblo Caldera Ring Fault also has a high potential for occurrence of uranium and zinc. The area had 53 mining claims as of October 16, 1987.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC COMMENTS

During formal public review of the draft EIS, a total of 75 comments specifically addressing this WSA were received. Of those, 64 were written and 11 were oral statements received at the 24 public hearings on the EIS. In general, 45 comments supported wilderness designation for all or part of the WSA. Twenty-five comments supported no wilderness for the WSA, while five comments addressed the relative merits of the EIS, but took no formal position on wilderness designation.

Those favoring wilderness commented that the value of wilderness outweighs other values such as mining or grazing and that minerals that are found in the Pueblo Mountains WSA are commonly found elsewhere outside WSAs. Some of those favoring wilderness commented on several of the special features found within the WSA. These included geological features, botanical, wildlife and scenic qualities. Those opposing wilderness designation were concerned that wilderness would preclude exploration for and development of minerals and would adversely impact the range industry and individual livestock operators. Some of those opposed to wilderness believed that the economy would be adversely impacted if designated as wilderness.

The State of Nevada, State Office of Community Services, does not support the creation of wilderness areas through the closure of roads which have been used historically by Nevada residents for access. The Nevada State Department of Mines has no objections to wilderness designation. The Nevada Division of State Parks is in favor of wilderness designation.

There were three comment letters received on the Final EIS specific to this WSA. Two supported the all wilderness proposal for the WSA and one opposed certain road closures in the WSA.