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Wilderness Specialist's Report

Travel Management Rule EIS

**USDA Forest Service Southwestern Region
Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests**

Prepared by: Keith Pohs/Jill Grams
Senior Environmental Planners
SWCA Environmental Consultants

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Wilderness

The purpose of this specialist report is to examine the potential impacts on wilderness from the proposed action and other proposed alternatives as part of the implementation of the 2005 Travel Management Rule on the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests. This assessment is based on defining the existing conditions, determining management guidelines from the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) and the 2005 Travel Management Rule, and analyzing key components of the various alternatives including route designations, dispersed camping corridors, motorized big game retrieval, and designated Areas. Several issues related to wilderness were identified through the scoping process.

I. Analysis Questions to be answered.

Questions to be answered in analysis of wilderness on the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests as it relates to travel management are as follows:

- Will new roads be built in currently roadless areas?
- Could some existing roads be decommissioned to expand roadless areas?
- How much distance needs to be between areas open to motor vehicles or cross-country travel and wilderness areas?

II. Description of Affected Environment's Existing Conditions

Introduction

The Forests manage three congressionally designated Wilderness Areas. The last Primitive Area in the NFS, although it is not a designated Wilderness, occurs on the Apache National Forest. It is essentially managed as Wilderness and thus will be discussed along with the designated Wilderness Areas. Current management emphasizes allowing natural processes to be maintained or improved within Wilderness, as outlined in the LRMP. All motorized and mechanized vehicular use is prohibited in National Forest Wilderness (36 CFR 261.16). To serve as a framework for inventorying, planning, and managing recreation resources the USDA-Forest Service developed the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS), in accordance with the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974 (PL 93-378), amended by the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (PL 94-588). The ROS allows accurate stratification and definition for classes of outdoor recreation environments (see the Recreation section for more information about ROS).

Wilderness management includes the following:

Pristine Wilderness: These areas provide the most outstanding opportunities for solitude and isolation. User-created or game trails may exist but are not maintained or designated on maps or trail guides. Recreation opportunities in this pristine ROS offer primitive, unconfined experiences.

Primitive Wilderness: Recreation is managed to protect natural conditions, provide opportunities for primitive recreation, offer a moderately high degree of solitude, and

incorporate an ROS of semi-primitive non-motorized or primitive year-round. Travel is along primitive trails or unconfined.

Semi-primitive Wilderness: These areas are managed to protect natural conditions and to provide access to primitive or pristine areas. Encounters with other users may be frequent because of concentrated use in the area. Trail and bridge construction incorporates natural designs and native materials that complement the surrounding landscape whenever possible. Travel is primarily along a well-defined trail system.

Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests Wilderness

Passage of the national Wilderness Act of 1964 and the Arizona Wilderness Act of 1984 has resulted in the designation of three Wilderness Areas (Mount Baldy, Escudilla, and Bear Wallow) on the Forests. Although it is not a designated Wilderness, the Blue Range Primitive Area is managed as such under FSM 2320.3(11), which states “Manage primitive areas as wilderness areas consistent with 36 CFR 293.17 until their designation as wilderness or to other use is determined by Congress”, and thus will be discussed here. These areas are to be managed in order to preserve their natural conditions, with the imprint of humans substantially unnoticeable and with outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive, unconfined type of recreation. The congressionally designated Wilderness Areas are closed by regulation to all motorized equipment and mechanical transport, including motor vehicles (36 CFR 261.18). Travel is restricted to those on foot or horseback, and mechanized equipment is prohibited. An individual with a disability who requires the use of a wheelchair may use a wheelchair, however.

About 1 percent of the Forests’ approximately 2,018,050 acres, totaling 23,359 acres, is congressionally designated Wilderness. Table 1 presents the acreage of each area.

Table 1. Acres of Existing Wilderness and Primitive Areas on the Forests

Wilderness Area	Acres
Escudilla Wilderness	5,200
Mount Baldy Wilderness	7,079
Bear Wallow Wilderness	11,080
Blue Range Primitive Area	173,762

FSM 2320.3(5) recognizes that Wilderness does not exist in a vacuum and provides the direction that planning should take into consideration activities on both sides of Wilderness boundaries. At the same time, Forest Service direction is not to maintain buffer strips of undeveloped wildland adjacent to Wilderness Areas to provide an informal extension of Wilderness, nor to maintain internal buffer zones that degrade Wilderness values.

Mount Baldy Wilderness: The United States Congress designated the Mount Baldy Wilderness, totaling 7,079 acres, in 1970. Most of the Wilderness is heavily forested, although meadows occur along the creeks and rivers. Rising to 11,403 feet, the summit of Mount Baldy, Baldy Peak, is actually within the Fort Apache Indian Reservation; the Wilderness occupies Forests land along the mountain’s eastern slope (Forest Service 2008b).

Two major trails access the Wilderness. The popular West Baldy Trail (Sheep’s Crossing) follows the West Fork of the Little Colorado River for 8 miles. The East Baldy Trail (Phelp’s Cabin) follows the East Fork of the Little Colorado for 6 miles and receives much less foot

traffic. The trails join near the reservation boundary to form a 14-mile loop. The last ½ mile to the top of the mountain, on Fort Apache Indian Reservation land, is closed to the public (Forest Service 2008b). Mount Baldy Crossover Trail (#604) connects the above trails near the eastern wilderness boundary. Table 2 lists the area’s trailheads and whether the access is by surfaced or native surface road.

Table 2. Trailheads that Access Mount. Baldy Wilderness

Road	Trailhead	Trail Number	Road Surface
State Highway 273	West Fork Trail	94	Gravel
State Highway 273	East Fork Trail	95	Gravel

Escudilla Wilderness: The United States Congress designated Escudilla Wilderness in 1984, protecting a total of 5,200 acres. The third highest point in Arizona (10,912 feet), the summit of Escudilla Mountain is the centerpiece of the third smallest Wilderness Area in the United States. The Wilderness encompasses the upper reaches of the mountain, which was made famous by early forester Aldo Leopold (Forest Service 2008b). It was in the area that Aldo Leopold arrived at the side of a wounded wolf "in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes," an experience that changed his life. The last known grizzly bear in Arizona was killed here, and Leopold wrote: "Somehow it seems that the spirit of the bear is still there, prowling the huge meadows, lurking in the thick stands of aspen and spruce, wandering the steep slopes that looking down from is like looking out of the window of an airplane."

Two trails access Escudilla Wilderness. The 2.9-mile Escudilla National Recreation Trail approaches the summit from the Terry Flat Loop Road and leads to a lookout tower. The 2.5-mile Government Trail starts at the base of the mountain and also climbs to the summit (Forest Service 2008b). Table 3 lists the area’s trailheads and whether access is by surfaced or native surface road.

Table 3. Trailheads that Access Escudilla Wilderness

Road	Trailhead	Trail Number	Road Surface
Forest Road 56	Escudilla Trail	308	Native
Forest Road 56A	Government Trail	119	Native

Bear Wallow Wilderness: The United States Congress designated the Bear Wallow Wilderness in 1984, protecting a total of 11,080 acres. Some of the largest acreage of virgin ponderosa pine in the Southwest occurs in Bear Wallow Wilderness. Bear Wallow Creek flows year-round, shaded by riparian species such as willow and cottonwood. The creek provides habitat for the endangered Apache trout (Forest Service 2008b).

Five trails offer foot and horse access into Bear Wallow. The Reno Trail (1.9 miles) and the Gobbler Point Trail (2.9 miles) drop into the canyon from easily accessible trailheads on Forest Service roads. The Bear Wallow Trail follows the rocky stream bed 8.2 miles to the boundary of the San Carlos Indian Reservation. The Schell Canyon Trail (2.8 miles) connects the Bear Wallow Trail and the canyon floor to the Rose Spring Trail (4.5 miles), which skirts the southern

boundary along the precipitous Mogollon Rim (Forest Service 2008b). Table 4 lists the area’s trailheads and whether access is by surfaced or native surface road.

Table 3. Trailheads that Access Bear Wallow Wilderness

Road	Trailhead	Trail Number	Road Surface
Forest Road 54	Rose Spring Trail	309	Native
Forest Road 25	Bear Wallow Trail	63	Native
Forest Road 25	Reno Trail	62	Native
Forest Road 8154	Gobbler Point Trail	59	Native

Blue Range Primitive Area: The Blue Range Primitive Area was designated by the Secretary of Agriculture in 1933. Blue Range Primitive Area encompasses 173,762 acres and is the last designated Primitive Area in the United States. An adjacent 29,304-acre portion in New Mexico became the Blue Range Wilderness with the passage of the 1980 New Mexico Wilderness Act. However, as of 2008, the Arizona portion is still not congressionally designated Wilderness. As a Primitive Area, many of the rules that govern Wilderness Areas apply. No motorized or mechanized vehicles, including mountain bikes, are allowed; one may travel only on foot and horseback (Forest Service 2008b).

Lying at the southern edge of the Colorado Plateau, the Blue Range includes steep, heavily forested ridges and stream-filled canyons. The Mogollon Rim, made famous as the “Tonto Rim” in Zane Grey’s books, crosses the area from west to east. This rim, unique both from geological and ecological standpoints, is further enhanced by the spectacular Blue River Canyon. The Blue Range Primitive Area has an extensive trail system that enables one to access remote reaches of the area (Forest Service 2008b). Table 5 lists the area’s trailheads and whether access is by surfaced or native surface road.

Table 4. Trailheads that Access the Blue Range Primitive Area

Road	Trailhead	Trail Number	Road Surface
U.S. Highway 191	Horse Ridge Trail	38	Paved
U.S. Highway 191	P-Bar Lake	326	Paved
U.S. Highway 191/FR 29A	Foote Creek Trail/Steeple Trail	76/73	Paved/Native
U.S. Highway 191	KP North Fork/KP Rim	93/315	Native
U.S. Highway 191/FR 55	KP Trail	70	Paved/Native
U.S. Highway 191	Raspberry Trail	35	Paved
U.S. Highway 191	Lengthy Canyon Trail	89	Paved
U.S. Highway 191	Hagan Corral Trail	31	Paved
U.S. Highway 191	Strayhorse Canyon/Red Mountain	20/25	Paved
U.S. Highway 191	Bear Pen Springs	32	Paved

U.S. Highway 191	AD Bar Trail	14	Paved
Forest Road 184	Blue Cabin Ruins Trail	321	Native
Forest Road 184	McKittrick Trail	72	Native
Forest Roads 567/ 567A	Red Hill Trail	56	Native
Forest Road 567Q	Tutt Creek Trail	105	Native
Forest Road 281	Hinkle Trail	30	Native
Forest Road 281	Foote Creek/South Canyon/Lanphier	76/53/52	Native
Forest Road 281	Sawmill Trail	39	Native
Forest Road 281	Old Sawmill Trail	115	Native
Forest Road 281	Grant Creek Trail	75	Native
Forest Road 281	Steeple Trail	73	Native
Forest Road 232	Bonanza Bill Trail	23	Native
Forest Road 711	Winter/Little Blue/Stateline	555/41/618	Native
Forest Road 104A	Baseline	310	Native
Forest Road 475C	Blue River Trail	101	Native

Recreation activities

The Wilderness Act of 1964 limits the type of recreation activities that may occur in designated wilderness to non-motorized and non-mechanized methods of travel. In the wilderness areas in the ASNF, you can enjoy challenging recreational activities like hiking, backpacking, climbing, kayaking, canoeing, rafting, horse packing, bird watching, stargazing, and extraordinary opportunities for solitude. There are opportunities through out the forest for photographers, casual wildlife observers, hunters, and anglers. During the snow-free season, most system and non-system trails are open to foot and horse travel. These trails are built to different standards depending upon who is the intended user and the difficulty level. The Bear Wallow Wilderness, Escudilla Wilderness, and Mt. Baldy Wilderness offer good day trip hikes that are relatively short in distance. The Blue Range Primitive Area offers 23 designated trails that range in difficulty and length. Unauthorized (non-system) trails usually are routes that are currently used by recreationists but that are not maintained by the Forest Service. During the winter, the area-wide strategy for Wilderness allows non-motorized and non-mechanized travel predominantly in the form of cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. Year-round, off-trail travel is allowed for horse and foot traffic but is not encouraged because of the potential resource impacts from repeated use. There are no designated campgrounds within the Blue Range Primitive Area, Bear Wallow, Escudilla, or Mount Baldy wildernesses; however, camping is permitted in these areas up to 14 days.

Travel management conflicts

Within Wilderness, travel management conflicts exist even though motorized and mechanized use is prohibited. Some hikers dislike encountering horses or even evidence of horse use in the Blue Range Primitive Area, Bear Wallow, Escudilla, or Mount Baldy wildernesses. Some popular sites within these wilderness areas receive use levels inconsistent with primitive and semi-primitive recreation opportunity guidelines. Frequently, when private land is developed near Wilderness, recreationists expect nearby access to the national forest and will pioneer routes when those are not provided.