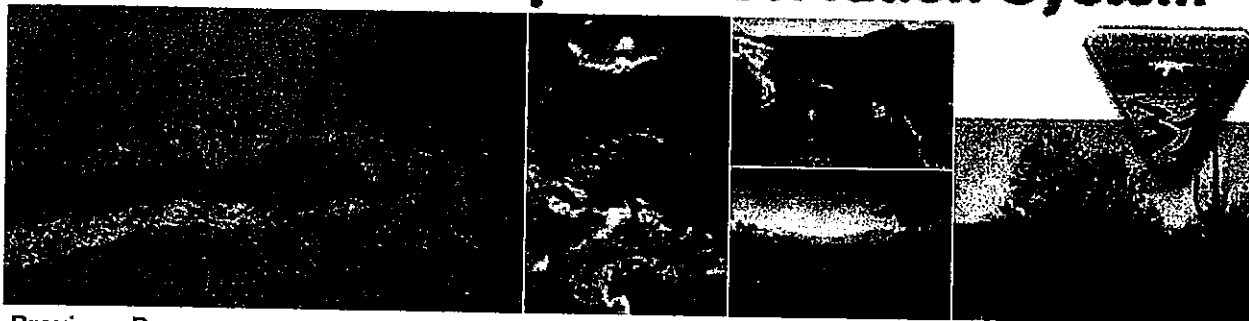


# National Landscape Conservation System



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## Frequently Asked Questions

### WILDERNESS STUDY AREAS (WSAs)

#### What is a WSA?

A WSA is a roadless area that has been inventoried and found to have wilderness characteristics as described in the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) and the Wilderness Act.

#### What is the BLM's authority to manage WSAs?

FLPMA directed the BLM to study the agency's roadless areas and recommend those that should be designated as wilderness. The BLM inventoried the lands it manages in order to identify those with the basic wilderness characteristics described in the Wilderness Act of 1964. Public lands that had wilderness characteristics were designated as WSAs and are managed to protect these wilderness values until Congress decides the future of these areas.

#### What wilderness characteristics are found in a WSA?

A WSA has the wilderness characteristics described in The Wilderness Act:

- **Naturalness:** the area generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable.
- **Outstanding Opportunities:** the area has either outstanding opportunities for solitude, or outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined types of recreation.
- **Size:** the area is at least 5,000 acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition.
- **Values:** the area may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.

#### What was the BLM's authority to designate WSAs?

BLM designated WSAs under the authority of the FLPMA Section 603(a) and Section 202.

#### Will the BLM designate new WSAs?

No. Settlement of the lawsuit, *Utah v. Norton*, clarified that BLM will not designate new WSAs.

### WILDERNESS STUDY AREA MANAGEMENT

### **How many WSAs is the BLM responsible for?**

The BLM manages over 600 WSAs covering almost 14.1 million acres nationwide. WSAs are located in all western states and Alaska.

### **How are WSAs managed?**

The BLM manages WSAs under the Interim Management Policy for Lands Under Wilderness Review (H-8550-1). This management is generally referred to as Interim Management or the Interim Management Policy (IMP). The BLM will manage WSAs to retain their wilderness character until Congress makes a decision to designate the area as wilderness or to release the area for non-wilderness uses. The IMP is the basic reference for WSA management and provides detailed direction on management of activities within WSAs.

### **What is the “non-impairment standard” used in managing WSAs?**

The IMP describes the FLPMA-mandated non-impairment standard, which directs the BLM to manage and protect wilderness characteristics of WSAs until the Congress acts. Section 603(c) of the FLPMA states that “. . . until Congress has determined otherwise, the Secretary shall continue to manage such lands according to his authority under the Act and other applicable law in a manner so as not to impair the suitability of such areas for preservation as wilderness . . .” The general standard for management of WSAs is to not allow actions or impacts that will preclude Congress’s prerogatives in either designating the areas as wilderness or releasing them for other non-wilderness uses.

### **How long will WSAs remain under the Interim Management Policy?**

WSAs will remain under the IMP until Congress designates them wilderness or releases them for other non-wilderness uses. There are no time limits on Congress so it is uncertain when final decisions will be made. Wilderness values within all WSAs are being protected by the BLM until Congress acts.

### **Is management of WSAs more restrictive than management of wilderness areas?**

No. By law, management of WSAs is less restrictive than management of wilderness areas. Some uses prohibited in a designated wilderness may be permitted in a WSA if they are temporary, do not create surface disturbance or do not involve placement of permanent structures. For example off-highway vehicles may drive on designated routes in WSAs and WSAs are open to location of new mining claims. Both activities are prohibited in wilderness.

### **What uses occur in WSAs?**

Similar to wilderness, a number of uses occur in WSAs. Uses include protection of air and watersheds; maintenance of soil and water quality, ecological stability, plant and animal gene pools, protection of archaeological and historical sites, habitat for wildlife; and livestock grazing. WSAs provide opportunities for outdoor recreation including: hunting, fishing, hiking, horseback riding, and camping. Off-highway vehicles may be used on designated routes. WSAs also provide for the exercise of prior valid existing rights such as water rights, mining claims, mineral leases, and rights-of-way. WSAs are open to location of new mining claims.

### **What are some of the other uses that occur in WSAs?**

*Air quality designations* – WSA designation has no effect on air quality designations.  
*Cultural and paleontological resources* – Inventories, studies, and research that involve surface examination or limited subsurface sampling may be allowed. Salvage of archaeological and paleontological sites, stabilization, reconstruction, and restoration of historic structures, and excavations may also be permitted.

*Fire management* – In many cases, fire is a natural part of the landscape. In these situations, the BLM is working to restore fire to its natural role. Natural and prescribed fires may be allowed to burn under certain conditions. In all cases, the equipment and tactics used to manage fires is designed to minimize the impact to wilderness values. When fire threatens human life or property, motorized equipment may be used to eliminate or minimize the threat.

*Landowner access* – A number of State and private land parcels lie within the boundaries of WSA's. Landowners have the right to access their property. In addition, owners of inholdings may continue to use them for a wide variety of purposes.

*Land acquisition within a WSA* – BLM may acquire privately owned lands within a WSA through an exchange or purchase if the owner is willing to sell. These types of acquisitions are usually supported by public land trusts.

*Land transactions* – Generally, public lands within WSAs may not be sold, leased, or exchanged.

*Livestock grazing* – The vast majority of WSAs are grazed by domestic livestock. Livestock grazing may continue in the same manner and degree as it took place in 1976. Developments such as fences, wells, and pipelines may be maintained. New livestock facilities may be constructed if they are temporary, or they benefit overall management of wilderness values. Vehicles may be used on designated routes to support grazing management. No special permits or authorization are required for this use.

*Mining* – The Mining Law of 1872 guides most mining operations on public lands including WSAs. Mineral activities that occurred in WSAs before 1976 may continue. Miners with valid claims may develop those claims even if wilderness characteristics are impaired. New mining claims can be located in WSAs. Activity on new claims must meet the non-impairment criteria and essentially avoid creating surface disturbance. Miners must contact the nearest BLM office before starting mineral development that has not been authorized. Plans of Operations are required for mining operations in WSAs.

*Mineral Leasing* – Leases for such resources as oil, gas, and potash may operate according to the terms and conditions of the lease. No new leases will be issued in WSAs.

*Recreation* – WSAs support a wide variety of recreation uses. Recreational uses in WSAs include activities such as hunting, fishing, hiking, horseback riding, backpacking, camping, nature study, rock hounding, photography, and climbing. Off-highway vehicles and bicycles may be used on designated routes. This use does not require any special permit or authorization. Cross-country travel with off-highway vehicles or bicycles is not allowed.

*Hunting and Fishing* – People hunt or fish in most WSAs. Some people prefer to hunt or fish in these areas because they enjoy the primitive experience. Hunting and fishing in WSAs, like other BLM lands, is licensed by the State.

*Outfitters* – BLM-authorized outfitters provide additional recreation opportunities in many WSAs. Outfitters commonly provide services in river running, hunting, and packing. Outfitters also provide Wilderness therapy programs for-at risk youth and Wilderness experience programs. Each BLM field office maintains a list of outfitters operating in local areas.

*Disabled use* – Wheelchairs can be used in WSAs. In addition people with disabilities use rafts, canoes, and pack animals to access Wilderness and WSAs. Certain outfitters conduct trips involving people with and without disabilities.

*Search and rescue* – Search and rescue occurs within WSAs. Vehicles may be used on designated routes without any special permit or authorization. Vehicles may be used for cross country travel when required in an emergency.

*Water rights* – WSA designation has no effect on water rights.

*Wood cutting* – People can gather dead and downed wood for campfires. Standing trees may not be cut for personal or commercial use.

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