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WILDERNESS REPORT

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BLM Issues Draft Wilderness Review Plan

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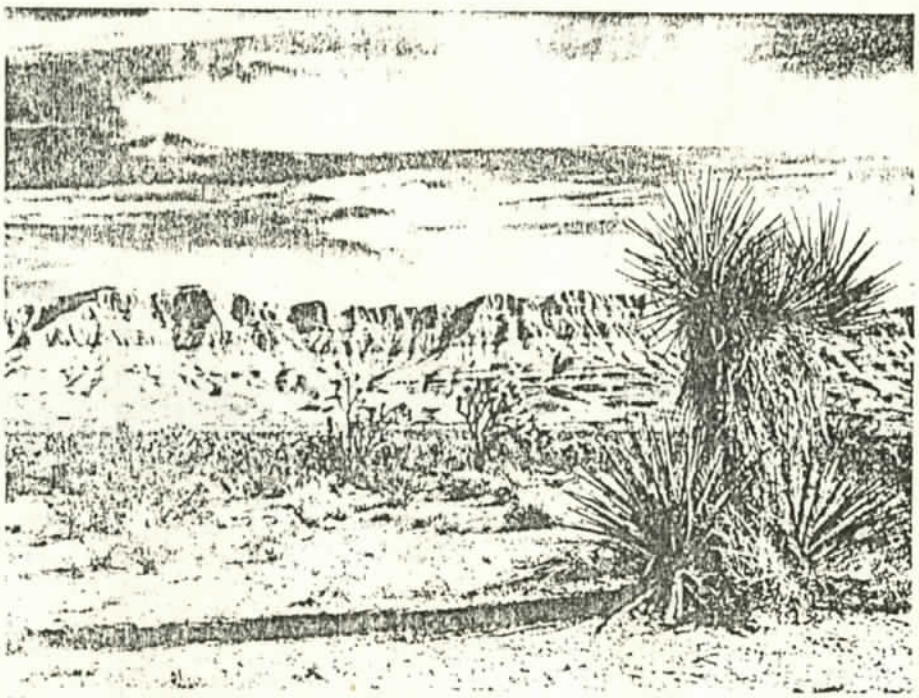
The Bureau of Land Management has released for public review a set of proposed policies and regulations that will form the guidelines for the wilderness review of millions of acres of the public lands. This long-awaited document comes nearly a year and a half after Congress passed the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA), better known as the BLM Organic Act, which mandates a complete inventory and land-use planning for some 470 million acres of land under the jurisdiction of the bureau.

These are the so-called "forgotten lands" of our nation's history—the leftovers after the homesteaders, railroads, national forests, national parks and wildlife refuges took their share. What remains has been defined as the lands nobody wanted, but it would be a serious mistake to think that these lands are of little worth. The public domain was originally so vast and varied that it has defied efforts to strip it of all its values, and today there remains much wild and spectacular country deserving consideration as BLM wilderness.

Most of the beautiful canyon country of Utah is on BLM land—Escalante Canyon, Dark Canyon and Grand Gulch to name just a few prominent areas. The Arizona Strip, a three million-acre chunk of remote desert fastness in northwestern Arizona encompasses Paria Canyon, the Vermillion Cliffs, the Virgin Mountains and Kanab Creek. The spectacular 3,000-foot sandstone bluffs of Red Rock Canyon in Nevada is only one of many prime candidates for wilderness designation in a state with vast BLM acreage.

So forgotten and overlooked were these lands that they were excluded from consideration under the 1964 Wilderness Act. This glaring omission was corrected by the 1976 BLM Organic Act which directed the Secretary of the Interior to evaluate appropriate roadless areas for wilderness consideration.



DAVE FOREMAN

No longer forgotten—Grand Wash Cliffs in northwestern Arizona is typical of the wild and scenic lands that will receive BLM wilderness review.

To implement the act BLM proposes to: (1) consider all public lands for their wilderness potential; (2) inventory all roadless areas of 5,000 acres or more plus all roadless islands and identify within two years those that qualify for wilderness study; (3) study and report to the President by July 1, 1980 the wilderness potential of all 55 natural and primitive areas formally identified by the bureau prior to November 1, 1975; (4) study and report to the President by October 1991 the suitability or non-suitability for wilderness designation of all study areas; and (5) apply protective interim management on areas that qualify for wilderness preservation until a final determination is made by Congress.

The recently drafted policy guidelines and regulations outline a proposed method of inventorying and identifying potential wilderness areas. This draft document is available upon request from state and district BLM offices and will be presented to the public at meetings in the western states and in Washington, D. C. during April. The merits of individual areas will not be discussed at this time, but the public may comment upon the proposed procedures. BLM is also accepting written comments until May 17, 1978.

It is essential that conservationists participate in these meetings and provide written input to ensure the BLM wilderness review gets off on the right track. The final guidelines will interpret criteria, set up definitions, determine how the inventory and evaluation process will work and will in short be a determining force in the quality and extent of the BLM wilderness system. Poor procedures will lead to inadequate and arbitrary wilderness selections. Thoughtfully conceived and carefully designed procedures will ensure a diverse and representative wilderness system for BLM lands.

BLM's tentative policy for the wilderness review is broken down into three phases:

(1) *Wilderness Inventory*—Roadless areas and islands with wilderness characteristics will be identified and a list of proposed "wilderness study

areas" will be presented to the public at a series of meetings. Recommendations for additions or deletions should be made at this time based on Wilderness Act criteria. To guarantee each area is given full consideration for wilderness study designation, resource conflicts will not be analyzed at this stage. All areas named for wilderness study will receive interim management until acted upon by Congress.

(2) *Study*—During this phase, which will be incorporated into the regular agency planning process, each study area will be evaluated for wilderness quality, manageability and "preservation advisability" when balanced against other compatible and non-compatible uses. Resource conflicts will be weighed and considered and public comment will be sought.

(3) *Reporting*—BLM will issue a preliminary report with recommendations for each study area. Those suggested for wilderness designation will be subjected to a mineral report, an environmental analysis review (EAR) or environmental impact statement (EIS) as required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and a formal public hearing. Areas not recommended for wilderness will also go through hearings, but no EIS or EAR will be made. The preliminary report will be revised as necessary to reflect the information and views obtained during this phase and final recommendations will be sent to the President who will then report to Congress.

Although the BLM wilderness review and the current Forest Service RARE II process are similar in some respects, they are two separate and different programs. A major difference is one of timing. RARE II is a short-term program to be completed in a year and a half, while the BLM review is a long-range effort scheduled to take 15 years. Additionally, many common terms are not defined in exactly the same way by each agency.

Conservationists must approach the BLM wilderness review differently from the RARE II program. BLM lacks a wilderness tradition or experience with the concept and for many years has been essentially a custodial agency with only minimal control and enforcement powers over public land users. These circumstances have created a strong and willful constituency who view with outright hostility the exercise of any federal control over these lands and who are consequently determined to preserve the status quo. Thus the wilderness concept enters the BLM arena with ready-made opposition and without the historical precedent of a strong preservation program.

ACTION LINE: The BLM wilderness review will require a great deal of citizen participation to achieve the needed protection of de facto wilderness on the public lands. You can choose your level of involvement from the following:

(1) Write to Frank Gregg, Director, Bureau of Land Management, Department of the Interior, Washington, D. C. 20240 and thank him for the bureau's effort to protect its wilderness resources through a careful and expeditious review. Request a fair and unbiased procedure for implementing that review.

(2) If you would like to be more actively involved request a copy of the draft procedures and a meeting schedule from your local BLM office. Attend the public meeting nearest you or send in written comments. Stress the following: a) general support for the proposed review process; b) a need for BLM coordination with other federal agencies having wilderness areas or proposals contiguous to BLM roadless areas; c) advisability of preparing an EIS or EAR for all areas including those not recommended for wilderness; d) agreement with the present definition of a "road"—ask that it not be weakened; and e) the importance of strict application of Wilderness Act criteria for selection of study areas.

Regardless of the level of involvement you choose, you can make a significant contribution to this long overdue effort to protect the wilderness resource on our nation's public lands.