



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

For Immediate Release

SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR RECOMMENDS ARAVAIPA FOR
WILDERNESS STATUS

Secretary of the Interior James Watt announced today he will seek wilderness status for Arizona's scenic Aravaipa Canyon.

The canyon, in Pinal and Graham counties 22 miles southeast of Winkelman, would become the first land under Bureau of Land Management jurisdiction to be taken into the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Wilderness areas are special areas that have little visible impacts of man's encroachment and are essentially primeval in character.

Watt said in Phoenix that he is recommending wilderness status for the 12-mile long canyon and is urging accelerated completion of reviews required before his recommendation goes to the President.

"I've not had the pleasure of visiting Aravaipa," Watt said, "but associates who have hiked the canyon were overwhelmed by the experience. The canyon has been described to me as a jewel in the desert, and I'm anxious that it be preserved so future generations of Americans can be overwhelmed as well."

Secretary Watt's recommendation will be made to the President who then will make his recommendation to Congress, which takes final action in adding areas to the National Wilderness System.

Watt made the announcement at the office of Governor Bruce Babbitt following a ceremony during which he turned over title to several thousand acres of federal lands to the state, local governments, and school districts.

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Governor Babbitt praised the Interior Secretary's actions, saying "I have hiked through Aravaipa and I assure you, Mr. Secretary, that the area is all that you've been told and more."

The canyon and adjacent lands that would be included in the wilderness area encompass some 5,000 acres. The area, 120 miles southeast of Phoenix and 90 miles northeast of Tucson, was declared a Primitive Area in 1969--the first BLM area in the nation to be so designated.

Aravaipa has received national prominence. In addition to its undisturbed beauty, the canyon is unique in having a perennial-flowing stream in a desert environment. Thousands of backpackers trek through the deep gorge every year, coming from all states as well as foreign nations.

Although rugged in appearance, the canyon ecology is extremely fragile. As a means of protection, the Bureau of Land Management limits daily numbers to 50 visitors per day. Reservations generally are booked weeks in advance.

Aravaipa was recommended to the Secretary as the Bureau's first wilderness in December, 1979. This recommendation followed extensive studies, including an environmental impact statement, development of management plans, and a minerals survey.

In addition to bighorn sheep, mule deer, foxes, mountain lions, coyotes, bobcats, javalina, and many other small mammals inhabit the canyon and its tributaries. Aravaipa Creek also supports several unique fish species along with the more than 158 counted bird species.

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