



WILDERNESS STUDY AREAS Oregon/Washington BLM

What is a Wilderness Study Area?

The BLM manages 517 wilderness study areas also known as – WSAs -- containing about 12.6 million acres in the western States and Alaska. WSAs are places that have wilderness characteristics – in other words, its size, naturalness, and whether it has outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive recreation.

The BLM in Oregon and Washington manages 130 different National Conservation Lands: two national monuments; one cooperative management and protection area; one outstanding natural area; nine wilderness areas; 25 wild & scenic rivers; four national and historic scenic and historic trails; and 88 wilderness study areas. These wilderness study areas are primarily located in southeast Oregon in the Prineville, Lakeview, Burns and Vale Districts – and these 88 areas comprise over 2.6 million acres.

Are Wilderness Study Areas a new thing?

Nope. As early as 1926, the earliest advocates of wilderness preservation had acknowledged the beauty and important ecological values of the desert lands under the BLM's administration as candidates for wilderness protection. In 1976, Congress directed the BLM to evaluate all of its land for the presence of wilderness characteristics, and identified areas became WSAs.

The establishment of a WSA served to identify areas for Congress to consider for addition to the National Wilderness Preservation System. Until Congress makes a decision to add a WSA, or ends consideration, we manage them so they might someday be considered for wilderness.

Wilderness preservation is part of the BLM's multiple-use mandate, and the wilderness resource is recognized as one of the array of resource values considered in the land-use planning process.

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The Federal Land Policy and Management Act provides direction to the BLM on the management of WSAs and states that we're to manage these areas as not to impair the suitability of such areas for preservation as wilderness.

Why does BLM manage Wilderness Study Areas?

The original wilderness review process outlined under FLPMA had three phases: inventory, study, and reporting to Congress. The wilderness inventory was conducted from 1978 to 1980, and excluded Alaska and Oregon and California Grant Lands Act of 1937 (O&C Act) lands managed primarily for timber production.

The original inventory focused on roadless areas of public lands of 5,000 acres or more and on roadless islands, but also included areas of less than 5,000 acres that had wilderness characteristics in association with contiguous roadless lands managed by another agency.

The inventory phase identified areas that were found to have the characteristics of wilderness as laid out in the Wilderness Act of 1964, specifically has the area been unaffected by human imprint; are there opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; is the area at least 5,000 acres; and does it contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical values.

When these characteristics were found within a defined boundary, the presence of the wilderness resource was documented and the area was classified as a WSA.

Additional WSAs were designated through the BLM land use planning process under FLPMA after the reports to Congress were completed in 1993.

In Oregon/Washington the Wilderness study report was completed in October 1991.

What is the difference between a Wilderness Area and a Wilderness Study Area? Aren't they the same thing?

Areas designated as wilderness by Congress are managed under the Wilderness Act. For wilderness study areas, FLPMA mandates that the BLM "not impair the suitability" of areas we have identified as "having wilderness characteristics." There is a difference between these two mandates.

What does BLM do with Wilderness Study Areas?

The BLM's management policy is to continue resource uses on lands designated as WSAs in a manner that maintains the area's suitability for preservation as wilderness in the future. The BLM's policy will protect the wilderness characteristics of all WSAs in the same or better condition than they were on October 21, 1976, until Congress determines whether or not they should be designated as wilderness.

Managing to prevent impairment: Preventing impairing activities through public information. It is important to ensure that the public, commercial entities, other governmental entities, and BLM staff are aware of the location of WSAs and their management requirements.

BLM posts signs at key WSA access points, provides maps and information about WSAs on BLM websites, and ensures that internal and external maps include WSA boundaries.

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Monitoring: All WSAs are to be monitored to ensure continued suitability for designation as wilderness. BLM Field Offices use staff, volunteer assistance, “Adopt- A-WSA” efforts, ranger patrol, or cooperative agreements with local law enforcement agencies to ensure that WSAs are being monitored sufficiently to detect impairing activities.

Documentation: Field Offices maintain files for each WSA. These files include photo documentation of transportation routes, range developments, mining activities, property boundaries, and other similar sites where, over time, activities may impact the naturalness of the WSA.

What can happen in a Wilderness Study Area?

The BLM reviews all proposals for uses and/or facilities within WSAs to figure out whether the development or activity would hard the suitability of the WSA for preservation as wilderness. This includes:

Figuring out whether the use or facility is temporary;

Whether the use or facility would create new surface disturbance. Certain activities allowed in wilderness areas, such as recreational hiking, use of pack stock, or domestic livestock grazing, are recognized as acceptable within a WSA, although, in the literal sense, they cause surface disturbance.

Can you fight fires in Wilderness Study Areas? I heard that BLM can't.

In many cases, fire is a natural part of the landscape. In these situations, the BLM works 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.

Specific fire management activities are governed by objectives, policies, actions, and plans described in final wilderness management plans prepared for individual wilderness areas.

The response to a fire can change over the course of the event due to variations in weather, topography, fuels, and resources available. Managers will use a decision support process to guide and document wildfire management decisions. The process will provide situational assessment, analyze hazards and risk, define implementation actions, and document decisions and rationale for those decisions.

BLM use "minimum impact suppression tactics" or "light hand on the land" suppression techniques wherever possible, while providing for the safety of firefighters and the public and meeting fire management objectives.

Are there management exceptions for Wilderness Study Areas?

There are a number of different situations where the BLM will consider making exceptions to the activities or proposals in a wilderness study area. These include emergencies, public safety, valid existing rights, and “grandfathered” uses.

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In emergencies, any action necessary to prevent loss of life or property may be taken, even if the action will impair wilderness suitability. Emergencies include things like fire, flood, pursuit of criminal suspects, search and rescue operations, and recovery of deceased persons.

In addition to emergencies, the BLM may take actions like remediation of human-caused hazards in the area like mine entrances and abandoned mines.

Valid existing rights are those that existed on the date of approval of FLPMA (October 21, 1976). Examples of these rights include: a mining claim, a mineral lease, or a right-of-way authorizations.

Grazing, mining, and mineral leasing uses and facilities that were allowed on the date of approval of FLPMA (October 21, 1976) are also grandfathered as a preexisting uses. Grandfathered uses only include grazing, mining, and mineral leases, and do not include other uses such as recreational activities.

Grandfathered uses may be acquired by a new operator, but cannot be transferred to a different location.

Can you camp and backpack in Wilderness Study Areas?

Most recreational activities (including hiking, horseback riding, fishing, hunting and trapping, camping, and other primitive forms of recreation) are allowed in wilderness study areas. However, some activities may be prohibited or restricted if they require permanent structures or depend upon cross-country use of motor vehicles or mechanical transport (for example: pickup vehicles for balloons or sailplanes).

Or an area may become more frequently used for camping, thereby causing broad physical impacts to soils or vegetation, or an area may become popular for mountain biking, and the resulting increase in use results in a loss of solitude. In either case, the BLM must take some action to address the impairment of wilderness characteristics.

Care must be taken not to concentrate use by promoting a recreational activity that is normally allowable but at high use levels would cause damage or create a conflict that may constrain Congress' ability to designate the area as wilderness.

Are cows allowed in Wilderness Study Areas?

Livestock management developments existing or under construction on October 21, 1976 may continue to be used and maintained in the same manner and to the same degree as such use was being conducted on that date. In other words, they can have the same, but not more, physical or visual impact as they did at that time.

New livestock management developments may only be approved if they meet the non-impairment standard. We look at whether or not the development will be unnoticeable, or whether or not it requires new motorized access.

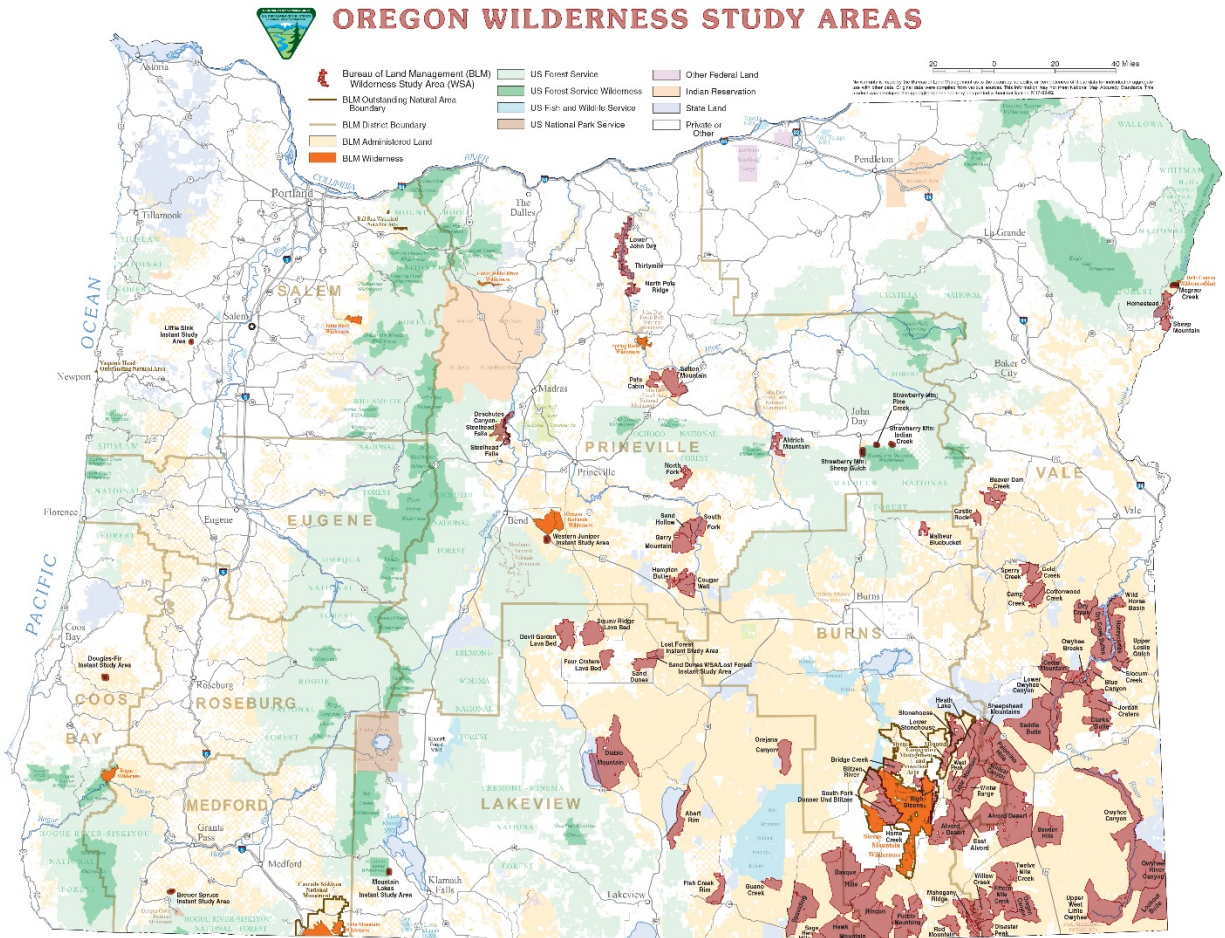
Can I fly a drone in a wilderness study area?

Currently there's no specific policy on the use of drones in WSAs. That said, drone use can disturb an area's outstanding solitude and primitive recreation setting. It can also hinder recreation opportunities for others in the area. FAA rules require that the drone be within the sight of the pilot at all times.

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We have no authority over airspace, so can only highly discourage overflights, but we can control take-offs and landings. These are prohibited inside a Wilderness area (and all internal primitive routes are closed to motorized and mechanized uses), and are prohibited off roads in OHV Closed or Limited areas outside the Wilderness area.

All of the other restrictions described for WSAs below apply, as well as FAA "line of sight" rules. The BLM has no authority over anything once off the ground.



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