

Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests Draft Wilderness Evaluation Report

Heber North Potential Wilderness

PW-03-01-012

June 2009

This draft potential wilderness evaluation report is divided into four parts: background, capability, availability, and need. Capability and availability are intended to be objective evaluations of existing conditions in the Heber North Potential Wilderness.

The most important area of focus for public comment is the “need” evaluation. The intent of this part of the evaluation is to consider if the potential wilderness fits into the National Wilderness Preservation System at the regional level. This report offers data that helps us understand different sources that might generate need. Ultimately, however, need for wilderness is generated by public demand. Therefore, public input is an essential component of this part of the potential wilderness evaluation.

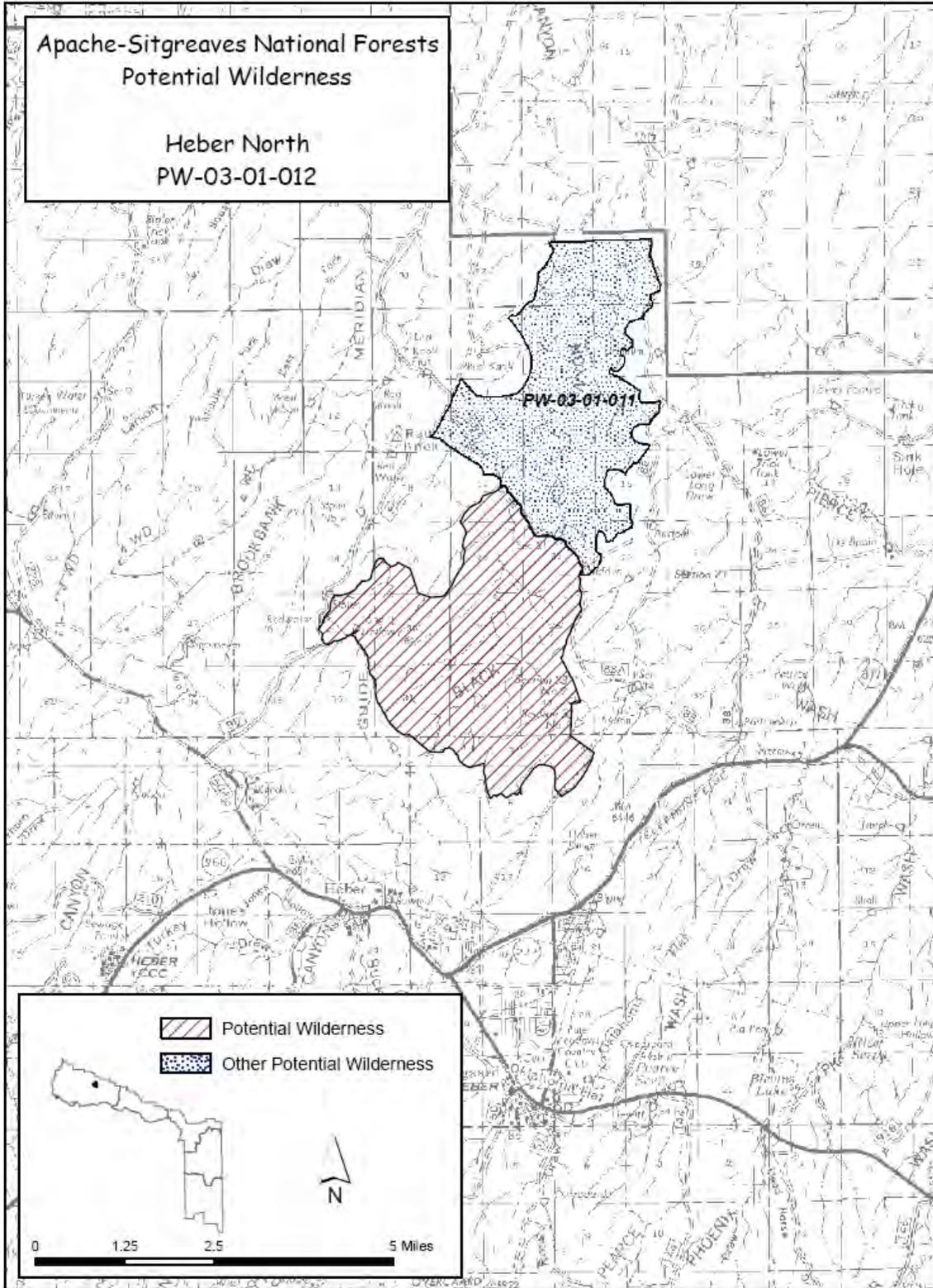
We would like your feedback on this draft report - if we have missed an important detail or if you would like to share your comments or other input, please contact us. Written comments can be sent to: Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests, Attention: Forest Plan Revision Team, P.O. Box 640, Springerville, Arizona 85938, or E-mail: asnfp.planning@fs.fed.us. We are also available by phone; ask for a planning team member at 928-333-4301 or 928-333-6292 (TTY).

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Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests
Potential Wilderness

Heber North
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Disclaimer Statement

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Map created June 2009 by etreiman.

Introduction

As part of the Forest Plan Revision process for the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests (ASNFs), the Forest Service has prepared this Wilderness Evaluation Report for the Heber North potential wilderness.

Purpose

The Forest Service must evaluate all lands possessing wilderness characteristics for potential wilderness during plan revision (39 CFR 219.17). Completion of a potential wilderness inventory and evaluation is an essential step in the plan revision process. Wilderness is just one of many special area designations that the Forest Service considers during plan revision, but it is one of only three special area evaluations that are mandatory. If an area is recommended for wilderness designation, then the revised plan would contain desired conditions, objectives, and/or guidelines that would protect its wilderness characteristics.

The Process

The wilderness evaluation began with an inventory of potential wilderness, which includes areas of federal land over 5,000 contiguous acres and other areas that meet the criteria in FSH 1909.12 Ch. 71, and then determined if those areas meet the definition of wilderness. Once a list of potential wilderness areas was created, each area was evaluated for capability, availability, and need. These evaluation factors are described in the introduction to each evaluation step and in Appendix A. This report summarizes the wilderness capability, availability, and need evaluations based on the best available information.

The ASNFs will use this report to determine whether or not to make a preliminary administrative recommendation for wilderness designation for the Heber North potential wilderness. The Responsible Official's (Forest Supervisor) recommendation will be documented in the final Plan and the Plan Approval Document. Public comments on this report will be accepted and considered throughout the plan revision process. If a potential wilderness is recommended for wilderness, the recommendation will receive further review by the Chief of the Forest Service and the Secretary of Agriculture. If the Chief of the Forest Service intends to move forward with a wilderness recommendation, the Forest Service will complete a detailed analysis of the trade-offs and impacts in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act, including further public review and comment. Ultimately, only Congress has the authority to designate wilderness.

Background

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| Name | Heber North |
| Number | PW-03-01-012 |
| Acres | 5,894 |
| Ranger District | Black Mesa |
| History (if applicable) | N/A |
| Location, Vicinity, and Access | Heber North potential wilderness is located in the western part of the ASNFs in Arizona. It is located in Navajo County, approximately 35 miles west-northwest of Show Low. The potential wilderness lies approximately 1½ miles north of Heber/Overgaard. The Heber North potential wilderness can be accessed from Heber/Overgaard on Forest Roads (FR) 95, 448E, 9965, and 488A. |
| Geography and Topography | The potential wilderness is located on the Mogollon Plateau, which drains north into the Little Colorado River. The area includes a portion of Black Canyon and many side drainages with elevations ranging from 6,200 feet to over 6,600 feet. |
| Surroundings | Forest Road 488A separates this area from the Black Canyon potential wilderness to the north. The Heber North potential wilderness boundary follows a combination of forest roads, activity areas, and terrain features. There is no private land adjacent to Heber North potential wilderness. |
| Vegetation | Vegetative communities within Heber North potential wilderness are limited. Black Canyon passes through piñon-juniper woodlands. The steep-walled canyon creates environmental conditions that allow some vegetation diversity, including a small area of mixed conifer forest. The narrow cottonwood-willow riparian forest along the sandy channel consists primarily of box elder, alder, narrowleaf cottonwood, willow, rose, poison ivy, and locust. Small benches throughout the canyon support a variety of grasses, herbaceous ground cover, and low shrubs. Some mullein, a Class C noxious weed, is found along the boundary roads. |
| Appearance and Key Attractions | <p>The primary scenic feature is the steep-walled canyon, with cliffs rising as much as 150 feet above the sandy bottom. The vegetation diversity along the stream corridor adds somewhat to the scenic qualities of the area.</p> <p>The natural beauty of the area is the primary attraction. The potential wilderness is easy to access, especially the perimeter and Black Canyon. This attracts many users.</p> |
| Special Designations | There are no special designations. |

CURRENT USES

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| Recreation | Most recreation involves hiking, horseback riding, and the use of ATVs. There are no developed trails or recreation sites within the area. The area has recreation emphases of Semi-Primitive Motorized and Roaded Natural. |
| Wildlife | Large wildlife species found in the area include elk, mule deer, black bear, and mountain lion. Small animals and birds also inhabit the area. |

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Range | Cattle grazing occurs throughout the potential wilderness in the Heber Allotment. |
| Water | Black Canyon is intermittent through the potential wilderness. All other drainages are ephemeral. There are two trick tanks/guzzlers within the potential wilderness. |
| Minerals | There are no mining claims, mineral districts, mineral withdrawals, or coal, oil and gas, or geothermal leases in the potential wilderness. |
| Heritage Resources | Isolated hunting camps and rock art from the Mogollon culture are found in the potential wilderness. |
| Fire | Two fires (both < ¼ acre) occurred between 1973 and 2006. Both were caused by lightning. |

Capability Evaluation

Wilderness capability describes the basic characteristics that make the area appropriate and valuable for wilderness designation, regardless of the area's availability or need. Five sets of factors are used to determine capability: naturalness, level of development, opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation, special features, and the ability of the Forest Service to manage the area as wilderness. The first four factors consider how the current conditions of the potential wilderness fit the definition of wilderness. Manageability is slightly different because it evaluates features of the area that would make it more or less difficult to manage as wilderness, such as size, shape, and juxtaposition to external influences. The following summarizes the information found in Appendix B.

Summary

Natural

Low to Medium

The potential wilderness is essentially natural and is predominantly piñon-juniper woodland with very small areas of four other vegetation types. Wildlife habitat diversity is low because of the low vegetation diversity. There are no perennial streams, known impoundments, and known water quality issues. Mullein is found along area roads, but there have been no surveys within the potential wilderness. The night sky is affected by large facilities to the east and northeast and communities to the south.

Undeveloped

Medium

There is some evidence of human activity in the potential wilderness. The area, especially Black Canyon proper, receives ATV use from the nearby communities. There are minimal range developments.

Outstanding Opportunities for Solitude or Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

Low

There are some opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation, but they are not outstanding. These opportunities could be found outside Black Canyon, but no water is available. There are few opportunities for solitude because of the proximity to nearby communities and the types of use the area receives.

Special Features and Values

Low

Black Canyon is the only distinctive feature. Some cultural sites have been found, but there has been no formal survey. There are no known unique or rare plant or animal species.

Manageability

Low

The potential wilderness would be difficult to manage as wilderness, because of its proximity to a populated area. Road boundaries provide good access. The area receives motor vehicle use, especially ATVs, from the nearby communities.

OVERALL CAPABILITY

Low

Because the overall capability of Heber North potential wilderness is **Low**, the area will not be carried forward. Availability and need evaluations will not be completed.

Appendix A: Wilderness Evaluation Process

The following is summarized from Forest Service Handbook 1909.12, Chapter 70. This process is used by the Forest Service to determine whether there are areas that could be recommended for wilderness designation by Congress. The process includes three steps: an inventory of potential wilderness areas, an evaluation of the potential wilderness areas, and a determination if a recommendation will be pursued for any potential wilderness areas.

Inventory of Potential Wilderness Areas

The first step in the evaluation of potential wilderness is to identify and inventory all areas within National Forest System Lands that satisfy the definition of wilderness found in the 1964 Wilderness Act.

Areas identified through this process are called potential wilderness areas. This inventory of potential wilderness is not a land designation. It is completed with the express purpose of identifying all lands that meet the criteria for being evaluated for wilderness suitability and possible recommendation to Congress for wilderness designation.

The inventory of areas relies on local knowledge and judgment regarding unique, site-specific conditions of each area being considered. The boundaries of areas for the potential wilderness inventory should facilitate easy on-the-ground identification.

Inventory Criteria

Areas qualify for inclusion in the potential wilderness inventory if they meet the statutory definition of wilderness and meet either criteria 1 and 3 or criteria 2 and 3 below.

1. Areas contain 5,000 acres or more.
2. Areas contain less than 5,000 acres, but meet one or more of the following criteria:
 - a. Can be preserved due to physical terrain and natural conditions.
 - b. Self-contained ecosystems, such as an island, that can be effectively managed as a separate unit of the National Wilderness Preservation System.
 - c. Contiguous to existing wilderness, primitive areas, Administration-endorsed wilderness, or potential wilderness in other Federal ownership, regardless of their size.
3. Areas do not contain forest roads (36 CFR 212.1) or other permanently authorized roads, except as permitted in areas east of the 100th meridian (sec. 71.12).

Areas may be included in the potential wilderness inventory even though they include the types of areas or features listed in FSH 1909.12, 71.11.

On the ASNFs, GIS was used to identify those areas that met the inventory criteria. Site-specific information was gathered from Ranger District (District) personnel to provide background information, identify features not shown in GIS, and determine where the Region 3 criteria on roaded areas, fingers, and extrusions should be applied.

Evaluation of Potential Wilderness Areas

An area recommended for wilderness must meet the tests of capability, availability, and need. In addition to the inherent wilderness quality it possesses, an area must provide opportunities and experiences that are dependent upon or enhanced by a wilderness environment. The ability of the Forest Service to manage the area as wilderness is also considered.

Capability

The capability of a potential wilderness is the degree to which an area contains the basic characteristics that make it suitable for wilderness recommendation without regard to its availability for or need as wilderness. The following characteristics are considered in evaluating a potential wilderness area:

1. Natural - an area is substantially free from the effects of modern civilization and generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature.
2. Undeveloped - the degree to which an area is without permanent improvements or human habitation.
3. Outstanding Opportunities for Solitude or Primitive and Unconfined Recreation - the capability of the area to provide solitude or primitive and unconfined types of recreation. This includes a wide range of experiential opportunities. Solitude is the opportunity to experience isolation from sights, sounds, and the presence of others from developments and evidence of humans.
4. Special Features and Values - an area is capable of providing other values such as those with ecologic, geologic, scientific, educational, scenic, historical, or cultural significance.
5. Manageability - the ability to manage an area as wilderness as required by the Wilderness and how boundaries affect manageability of an area.

Responses to the capability questions were drafted at the ASNFs Supervisors Office and reviewed by District personnel. Any changes were incorporated into the capability evaluation.

If an area is found to not be capable of being wilderness (a rating of Low), it is not carried forward into the Availability Evaluation.

Availability

Areas determined to meet wilderness capability requirements are considered potentially available for wilderness designation. The determination of availability is conditioned by the value of and need for the wilderness resource compared to the value of and need for other resources. Other resource potential including current use and potential future use is analyzed for the various resources involved.

Constraints and encumbrances on lands may also govern the availability of lands for wilderness. The degree of Forest Service control over the surface and subsurface of the area is also considered. The Forest Service should have sufficient control to prevent development of incompatible uses that would negatively affect wilderness character and potential.

Responses to the availability questions were drafted by at the ASNFs Supervisors Office and reviewed by District personnel. Any changes were incorporated into the availability evaluation.

Need

The need for an area to be designated as wilderness is determined through an analysis on a regional basis by evaluating such factors as the geographic distribution of areas and representation of landforms and ecosystems to which it contributes to the overall National Wilderness Preservation System. This need is demonstrated through a public involvement process, including public input to the evaluation report.

A set of GIS models, information papers, and analyses were provided by the Region 3 Regional Office. This information was synthesized at the ASNFs Supervisors Offices and reviewed by District personnel. Any changes were incorporated into the need evaluation.

Appendix B: Capability Evaluation and Ratings

Capability Characteristics

Natural

1. Presence of non-native species.

High - Non-native species are not evident.

Medium - Non-native species are evident in isolated spots.

Low - Non-native species are common or scattered throughout the area.

Rating: **High** - Mullein is found along the roads near the area, but there are no GIS records of the plant within the potential wilderness. No surveys have specifically been conducted for non-native species in the area.

2. Rivers within the potential wilderness are in free-flowing condition.

High - Rivers within the area are considered free-flowing.

Medium - Some rivers have impoundments or other issues that affect their free-flowing character.

Low - Rivers within the potential wilderness are seasonal or heavily impacted by impoundments.

Rating: **High** - There are no perennial streams in this potential wilderness. Black Canyon is intermittent, while other drainages are ephemeral. There are no known impoundments on these drainages.

3. Quality of night-sky as affected by light pollution.

High - The night sky is clear with little to no interference from light pollution.

Medium - Some stars are visible and there is moderate degradation from light pollution.

Low - Few stars are visible at night and the presence of light pollution is evident.

Rating: **Medium** - At higher elevations the night sky is affected by the glow from the Arizona Public Service Cholla power plant at Joseph City, AZ, on Interstate 40 and the Catalyst paper mill/biomass power plant west of Snowflake, AZ. Because of the proximity to Heber/ Overgaard, the night sky could be affected.

4. Presence of pollutants that degrade water.

High - All rivers/streams have been sampled and there are no water quality issues.

Medium - There are no known water quality issues within the area but the not all rivers/streams have been sampled.

Low - There are rivers within the area that are listed on the State Impaired Waters List (303d).

Rating: **Medium** - Because the streams are intermittent and ephemeral, they have not been sampled. There are no known water quality issues.

5. Area provides elements of biological diversity and naturalness, including unique habitats, TES or rare plants and wildlife.

High - Has critical or unique habitats and diverse ecological conditions.

Medium - Has a mix of habitats and ecological conditions.

Low - Has limited ecological conditions and habitats.

Rating: **Low** - The area has a limited number of habitats. No threatened, endangered, or sensitive plant or animal species are found in the area.

6. Area contains a variety of natural resources, including a variety of tree species and structures. Intermingled grasslands or meadows, numerous recreation opportunities, diversity of wildlife habitats, and wildlife, etc.

High - Diverse amount of natural resources.

Medium - Mixed amount of natural resources.

Low - Limited amount of natural resource diversity.

Rating: **Low** - The area is predominantly piñon-juniper woodland with very small areas of ponderosa pine forest, cottonwood-willow riparian forest, Great Basin grassland, and mixed conifer forest. There are few recreation opportunities other than hiking, horseback riding, and ATV use. The diversity of wildlife habitats is low because of the low vegetation diversity.

Undeveloped

7. Area has current or past evidence of human activity.

High - Little or no evidence of human activity.

Medium - Unnoticeable or unobjectionable human activity.

Low - Obvious evidence of human activity.

Rating: **Medium** - The area, especially Black Canyon proper, receives ATV use from the nearby communities. There are also two trick tanks/guzzlers in the area.

Outstanding Opportunities for Solitude or Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

8. Area provides physically and mentally challenging recreation opportunities that promote adventure and self-reliance.

High - Most of the area provides challenging recreation opportunities.

Medium - Some parts of the area have the potential for challenging recreation opportunities.

Low - Few parts of the area can provide challenging recreation opportunities.

Rating: **Medium** - Portions of the area outside of the canyon are rugged. Because there are no trails through the area, traversing these lands would be both physically and mentally challenging.

9. Opportunity to experience solitude and isolation from human activities while recreating in the area.
High - Significant feeling of being alone or remote from civilization.
Medium - Feeling of being alone is possible but signs of civilization are likely.
Low - Little opportunity of feeling alone.

Rating: **Low** - There is little opportunity of solitude because of the proximity of the area to the nearby communities and the use it receives from the residents.

10. Opportunity to engage in primitive and unconfined recreation such as backpacking, kayaking, hunting, fishing, etc

High - There are many opportunities for engaging in primitive recreation.
Medium - There are some opportunities for engaging in primitive recreation.
Low - There are few to no opportunities to engage in primitive recreation.

Rating: **Low** - Day-use hiking and horseback riding would be two of the few primitive recreation opportunities available in the area. There are no permanent water sources that would add to the recreation opportunities.

Special Features and Values

11. Area contains outstanding or distinct features like rock formations, panoramic views, etc.

High - Many distinct features or few but exceptional features.
Medium - Some distinct features.
Low - One or no distinct features.

Rating: **Low** - The only distinctive feature of the area is Black Canyon.

12. Area has potential for scientific research, environmental education, or historic/cultural opportunities.

High - Good potential for two or more types of these opportunities.
Medium - Potential for one type of opportunity.
Low - Little or no potential for this type of opportunity.

Rating: **Medium** - Cultural sites have been found in the potential wilderness, but a formal survey has not been completed.

13. Area contains unique or rare species of plants and/or animals.

High - Area has several unique or rare plants and/or animals.
Medium - Area has a few unique or rare plants and/or animals.
Low - Area has no unique or rare plants and/or animals.

Rating: **Low** - There are no known unique or rare plant or animal species in the area.

Overall Capability: Low to Medium

Manageability

14. Ability to manage the area for wilderness character, including distance and influence from outside activities; opportunity to access the area; and resource conflicts or encumbrances.

High - Isolated from areas of activity; controlled or limited access; no encumbrances or resource conflicts.

Medium - Somewhat isolated from areas of activity; adequate access opportunities; some resource conflicts and/or encumbrances.

Low - Areas of activity are nearby; many access opportunities; many resource conflicts and/or encumbrances.

Rating: **Low** - The southern edge of the area is approximately 1½ miles from the community of Heber/Overgaard. Most of the boundaries are roads, so access to the area is good. Black Canyon, with a wide sandy bottom, creates a corridor through the area.

15. Motorized use within the area.

Yes - Has motorized vehicle use.

No - Does not have any motorized vehicle use.

Rating: **Yes** - The area receives motorized vehicle use, especially ATVs, from the nearby communities.

Overall Manageability: Low