

Questa Ranger District

Columbine-Hondo and Wheeler Peak Wilderness Accompaniments

Suggested Evaluation Determination: This area does not have wilderness character.

Congressional action that took place in 2014 influenced how this area is evaluated. Based on 2014 legislation, portions of the Wheeler Peak Wilderness were removed as part of the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness designation. Since the removed area was recently evaluated by Congress, it will not be carried forward into evaluation.

If a wilderness characteristic is not addressed in the following rationale, that characteristic is not determined to be found in the evaluated area, except for size. If size is not addressed, the area is determined to be 5,000 acres or more per the [wilderness criteria](#). The five wilderness characteristics are: (1) apparent naturalness; (2) opportunities for solitude or unconfined recreation; (3) size; (4) ecological, scientific, educational, scenic, or historical values; and (5) manageability of wilderness characteristics.

Apparent Naturalness

Most of the Columbine-Hondo and Wheeler Peak Wilderness Accompaniments evaluated area lacks apparent naturalness, because of the visible impact from firefighting efforts during the 1996 Hondo Wildfire. These visual impacts include dozer lines, erosion control structures, and plantings. Thinning treatments used to combat an *lps* beetle outbreak, which began in 2002 and is still ongoing in 2016, have added to the impacts on apparent naturalness as well. Range and wildlife improvements, such as spring developments, trick tanks, stock tanks, and corrals, are scattered throughout the area. Fawn Lakes, Junebug, and Columbine Campgrounds are constructed recreation sites consisting of hardened campsites, fishing piers, parking areas, and day use areas that impact apparent naturalness.

One of the greatest impacts to apparent naturalness on the Columbine-Hondo and Wheeler Peak Wilderness Accompaniments evaluated area is from the molybdenum mine (currently held by Chevron, Inc.) east of Questa. Now a Superfund site, this open pit mine and the obvious evidence of ancillary activities, such as mountains of waste rock, exploratory roads, and test pits, detract from any apparent naturalness. Lastly, there is an electronic site and associated access road for multiple agencies on hilltop just south of Questa that is apparent from within the evaluated area.

When considering all of these factors together, this evaluated area does not offer apparent naturalness within the landscape.

Solitude or Unconfined Recreation

The Columbine-Hondo and Wheeler Peak Wilderness Accompaniments evaluated area offers limited opportunities for solitude or unconfined recreation, because it is a high concentrated use area by the communities of Questa, Lama, San Cristobal, Gallina, and Red River. The area also serves as a destination point for people residing outside the Carson National Forest who come to visit the developed recreation areas of Fawn Lakes, Junebug, and Columbine Campgrounds, as well as the area around the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Area. These campgrounds are some of the highest used recreation sites on forest and remain full throughout the camping season. Other uses also consist of fuelwood gathering, piñon picking, driving for pleasure, dispersed

camping (including car camping), hunting, fishing, and autumn aspen viewing. Additionally, the access roads to the lakes, campgrounds, and existing wilderness areas are constantly used during the summer by ATVs and other motor vehicles.

The western and southern portions of the evaluated area do not offer opportunities for solitude or unconfined recreation, because of the private land inholdings that are dispersed throughout. These private land inholdings consist of concentrated populations, including townships, private corporations, and residential inholdings.

Outstanding Values

Cryptograms are the most outstanding feature found in this evaluated area.

Manageability

It would be difficult to manage most of the Columbine-Hondo and Wheeler Peak Wilderness Accompaniments evaluated area to preserve wilderness character, since the Kiowa-San Cristobal restoration project is still being implemented over several more years within the area. This project requires mechanized and motorized equipment for thinning and stream improvements.

Adding to the manageability concerns is that motorized access and use of mechanized equipment for the maintenance of range and wildlife improvements, such as spring developments, trick tanks, stock tanks, and corrals, have been long established and, in some cases, required. This area is also popular for hunting, where participants use ATVs for access to the area. This historic use is popular and serves to encourage vehicle encroachment into the area. This area is also within the wildland urban interface (WUI) for the communities of Questa, La Lama, San Cristobal, Red River, and Gallina, where all fire suppression efforts would be the priority to protect life and property.

Other considerations that may affect the manageability of wilderness character in this area include long established traditional and cultural uses that consist of fuelwood gathering, hunting, and piñon picking from the communities of Taos, Questa, Cerro, San Cristobal, and La Lama.