

West Pioneer (No. 1-006)

229,710 Acres

Description

The West Pioneer Roadless Area is located in the Pioneer Mountains in Beaverhead County, Montana. Several gravel access roads are available from the Pioneer Mountain Scenic Byway on the east, State Highway 278 on the south and west, and State Highway 37 on the north. In some areas the scenic byway is the roadless area boundary, with access available at turnouts along the road.

Elevations range from 6,500 feet in the gentle lower terrain to 9,500 feet at the peaks of Odell, Shaw, and Stine Mountain. Ten cirque lakes lie near the crest of the range. Sagebrush and mountain grasslands dominate the vegetation along the perimeter. Sedges occupy meadows and stream courses in the higher elevations.

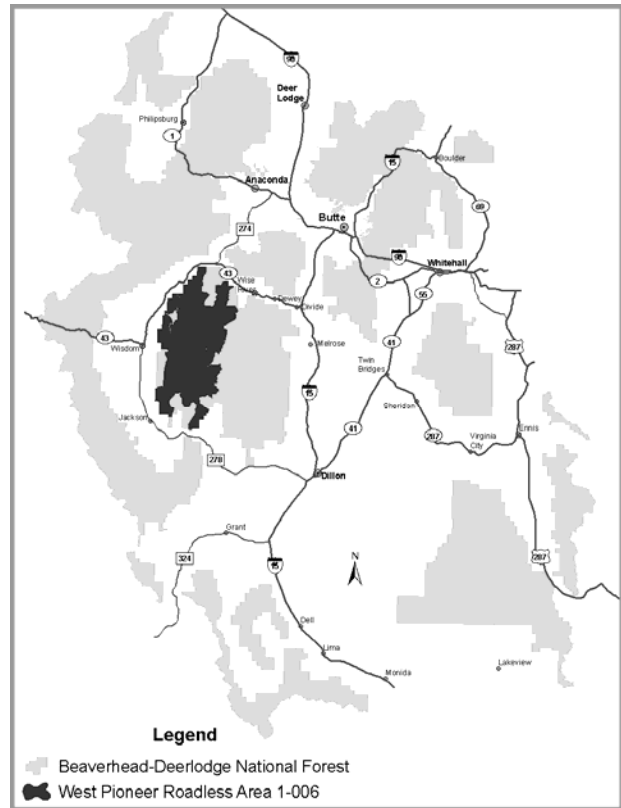
Lodgepole pine is the dominate tree species, blanketing most of the remaining area, with whitebark pine present along ridges at the tree line. A stand of alpine larch, rare east of the continental divide in Montana, is located on Stine Mountain. Soils are shallow, rocky, loamy coarse sands in the uplands; and deep, poorly-drained sands and loams in the lower stringer meadows.

Capability

Integrity of the Natural Environment and Scenery: The area is mostly natural appearing and scenic integrity is high. Natural integrity has been affected by low standard roads, livestock grazing, and isolated patches of noxious weeds. The effects of fire exclusion throughout the forest are very apparent here, with dense or old and overgrown lodgepole pine a prominent feature of the landscape. Outside of the area are timber harvest, roads, and private ranching developments. The Pioneer Mountains Scenic Byway, on the eastern edge, has several recreation developments, including campgrounds, trailheads, Elkhorn Hot Springs Resort, and Maverick Mountain Ski Area. These developments affect natural and scenic integrity on the perimeter.

Opportunities for Solitude and Primitive Recreation: Opportunities for solitude are best within the WPWSA (Area 1-006), and particularly in the southern half of the area in summer. Opportunities for solitude are less in 1-006 D, E, and F because of the sight and sounds of traffic from nearby highways and roads, including the Pioneer Mountains Scenic Byway in summer and its use as a national snowmobile trail in winter.

Opportunities for primitive recreation are highest in the southern half in summer. Highways surround the area and further reduce primitive opportunities along the edges of the roadless area.



Area 1-006 E, a narrow strip, is too close to developments and the Byway to provide solitude or primitive recreation.

Special Features: The West Pioneer Wilderness Study Area, Skull O'Dell Research Natural Area, and most of the Pioneer Loop National Recreation Trail.

Manageability and Boundaries: 1-006, the West Pioneer Wilderness Study Area, has boundaries which are difficult to locate and manage. 1-006E is close to the Pioneer Mountain Scenic Byway, and would be difficult to manage as Wilderness due to the nearness of activities or sites and sounds. Area 1-006B has an excluded area near its center. The excluded area and Doolittle road system would make managing the area difficult. Areas 1-006 A and F would be difficult to manage due to their boundary locations. A manageable area could be made within the larger area, with boundaries located on identifiable features.

Availability

Recreation: The Pioneer Loop National Recreation Trail and other trails in the northern half of the area are used by backcountry enthusiasts using motorcycles and ATVs in summer. The southern half has nonmotorized summer trails. Horseback travel, hiking, and other nonmotorized activities are common throughout the area, especially during big game hunting season. The area is used for un-crowded backcountry snowmobiling in winter.

Wildlife: The IRA provides secure habitat for wildlife enhancing linkages and connectivity across the landscape in between GYA and forests to the west and north. Wolverine denning and Canada lynx habitat are mapped and sightings of both species are documented. Westslope cutthroat trout inhabit some stream segments.

Water: All streams in this area are tributary to the Big Hole River. Streams maintain biological values, channel structure, and riparian function. Water from this area is used downstream for irrigation, and is distributed by ditches. There are many developed springs for livestock use within the area. Increases in water demand for fisheries requirements or for irrigation are likely.

Livestock Grazing: There are several grazing allotments in the roadless area, including two in 1-006A, three in 1-006B, five in 1-006C, four in 1-006D, three in 1-006E, and one in 1-006.

Timber: There is no suitable timber base in this roadless area.

Minerals/Oil & Gas: Ninety-four percent of the area is favorable for small vein deposits of gold, silver, and associated base metals. Forty-two percent is favorable for molybdenum deposits. Less than one percent of the area is included in a high value known locatable mineral deposit area and eight percent is included in a medium value known locatable mineral deposit area. One percent of the area has geothermal resource potential. Forty-six percent has low oil & gas potential, while the remainder has very low potential.

Heritage: The potential for prehistoric and historic cultural resources is unknown. Native American occupation in the past suggests sites may exist.

Land Use Authorizations: There are no special uses which limit Wilderness potential.

Non-Federal Lands: There are 573 acres of private lands in 1-006, 1-006B, C, and D.

Disturbances: There are infestations of spruce budworm at lower elevations and of mountain pine beetle in areas of dense lodgepole.

Need

Ecological: The West Pioneer roadless area is a part of the Beaverhead Mountains Ecological Section, and would contribute underrepresented riparian and wetland communities, and upland shrub land and grassland cover types. The area would also contribute refuge for wolves, wolverine, lynx and native fish populations.

Social: The West Pioneer Wilderness Study Area has about the same boundary as 1-006. Areas 1-006A through 1-006F are outside of the WSA. The 1979 study by the Forest Service determined the West Pioneers Wilderness Study Area was not a good candidate for Wilderness. Congressional action is required in order to designate 1-006 as Wilderness, or to release it from WSA status. Some people asked that the West Pioneers WSA be recommended. Others strongly opposed recommendation because they seek to protect existing backcountry motorized recreation.

Suitability

Capability: Natural integrity has been affected by a few roads and two track trails, grazing, and fire exclusion. The area can provide opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation, and includes the congressionally designated West Pioneer Wilderness Study Area. The existing boundaries include areas which would be difficult to manage. A new boundary could be drawn which would reduce the area's size but would be more manageable.

Availability: The area includes private lands where road access is established and there are concerns with availability. There are no other contractual obligations or resource needs which limit Wilderness availability.

Need: The area would add lands and contribute underrepresented vegetation cover types to the NWPS. Wilderness recommendation for the West Pioneers has received both strong support and strong opposition from the public.

Wilderness Evaluation Summary

IRA	Acres*	Capability	Availability	Need	Suitability
West Pioneer 1-006	151,092	Moderate	High	High	Moderate
West Pioneer 1-006A	12,297	Moderate	High	Moderate	Moderate
West Pioneer 1-006B	24,686	Low	Moderate	Moderate	Low
West Pioneer 1-006C	12,114	Low	High	Moderate	Low
West Pioneer 1-006D	9,553	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
West Pioneer 1-006E	10,603	Low	Low	Moderate	Low
West Pioneer 1-006F	9,364	Low	High	Low	Low
West Pioneer 1-006 Total	229,710				

**Nonfederal lands are excluded from the acreage.*

West Pioneer IRA Changes from 1987 to 2007

Updated Acres by Map Categories	BDNF Acres Only
1987 Total	251,864
Acres Added	1,332
Acres Dropped	-19,892
GIS Acreage Recalculated	-3,594
2007 Total	229,710

Note: Recalculated acreage using GIS include changes to one or more of the following categories: land exchanges, refined mapping scales, updated acre calculation techniques, and/or mapping error corrections.

Alternatives and Environmental Consequences**IRA Disposition by Alternative**

Roadless Acres in Allocation	Alt 1	Alt 2	Alt 3	Alt 4	Alt 5	Alt 6
Recommended Wilderness	1%	--	--	--	--	--
Wilderness Study Area	65%	65%	65%	65%	65%	65%
Summer Non-Motorized *	49%	46%	69%	46%	58%	13%
Backcountry Recreation	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	20%
Road-based	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	1%
Current Travel Plan Applies	51%	53%	31%	53%	42%	n/a
Winter Non-Motorized	8%	8%	15%	8%	8%	8%
Fisheries Key Watershed	n/a	n/a	10%	10%	10%	10%
Restoration Key Watershed	n/a	n/a	8%	--	1%	--
Tentatively Suitable Timber	22%	22%	22%	22%	22%	22%
Modeled Suitable Timber	9%	--	--	--	--	--
Modeled Suitable Range	9%	9%	9%	9%	9%	9%
Moderate Oil & Gas Potential	--	--	--	--	--	--

* Summer Non-motorized **includes** Recommended Wilderness and Some Wilderness Study Area allocations for Alternatives 1 through 5. Summer Non-motorized, Recommended Wilderness, and Wilderness Study Area allocations are **mutually exclusive** in Alternative 6.

None of the alternatives recommends the West Pioneer Wilderness Study Area (Subunit 1-006), for Wilderness. The FEIS states under Chapter 2, “Elements Common to all Action Alternatives” that Wilderness Study Areas set aside in 1977 through the Montana Wilderness Study Act, P.L. 95-150 will be managed according to the Act and direction from Courts, regardless of alternative. Until Congress acts, the law requires the Forest Service to protect Wilderness character and allow continuation of uses in place prior to 1977. This does not prevent the Forest Service from making site specific decisions to close areas or trails in the future based on need.

Subunits outside of the WSA (A, B, C, D, E and F) ranked “Moderate” or “Low” for Wilderness suitability and are not recommended for Wilderness in any alternative. Wilderness characteristics in these units are affected by adjacent development like surrounding highways, scenic byway activities, ski area, and other private developments.

Activities allowed by Alternatives 2-6 have a low risk of reducing existing Wilderness characteristics in this area. The non-motorized and backcountry allocations in Alternative 6, however, limit expansion of motorized use. Non-Wilderness recommendations in all alternatives allow established backcountry recreation uses and grazing management activities to continue.