

# South Sierra Wilderness Addition (East) Potential Recommended Wilderness Area Inyo National Forest

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*This recommendation was derived from Wilderness Evaluation Polygon #1391*

## **Number of Acres**

Approximately 18,150 acres.

## **Location and Description of Recommended Boundary**

The recommended boundary encompasses the eastern portion of the South Sierra Inventoried Roadless Area within the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The boundary uses a combination of the Inyo National Forest boundary, South Sierra Wilderness boundary, natural features and a county road to delineate the recommended area. The boundary is set back 200 feet from the county road to be consistent with other wilderness boundary setbacks on the forest.

The western boundary of the potential recommended area uses the eastern boundary of the South Sierra Wilderness for a majority of its length, and natural features for the remainder of its length. The natural feature is a prominent ridge, which the public could locate on a map or on the ground. The Inyo National Forest boundary is used for the southern boundary and the majority of the eastern boundary of the recommended area. The eastern boundary in the Sage Flat area uses the forest boundary with several parcels of adjacent private property and an offset from Sage Flat County Road. The recommended boundary includes three cherry stems where the boundary skirts shorts road segments that protrude into the area. The cherry stem along Haiwee Canyon County Road is 1 mile long, and provides access to the Haiwee Canyon trailhead and Los Angeles Department of Water and Power facilities. The cherry stem along Forest System Road 21S101 is .9 miles long. The Tunawee Ranch private property also forms a 36-acre cherry stem along the southeast corner of the potential recommended area.

The boundary supports management of the area as potential wilderness because of the following:

- With the possible exception of the boundary segments along private property, visitors would be able to locate the boundary on both a map and on the ground.
- The southern boundary and a majority of the eastern boundary use the legally determined forest boundary.
- The boundary minimizes the potential for motorized incursions into wilderness because the boundary is offset from roads that the public can locate both on maps and on the ground.
- The boundary excludes all motorized trails in the South Sierra Inventoried Roadless Area.
- With the exception of the private property parcels in the Sage Flat area, the lands adjacent to the recommended wilderness are managed by either the Forest Service or the Bureau of Land Management. The southern boundary is adjacent to the Sacatar Trail Wilderness, which is administered by the Bureau of Land Management.

## General Geography, Topography and Vegetation

The South Sierra Addition is located along the eastern escarpment the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Elevations range from 9,300 feet along the western boundary, to 4,300 feet along the eastern boundary. The area is characterized by steep slopes and forested canyons that descend to alluvial fans in the Mojave Desert. Haiwee Canyon, which contains a perennial stream, is the predominant drainage. Several other canyons along the escarpment contain streams that have perennial flows for some of their length.

Vegetation communities in the area include jeffrey pine, mountain mahogany, pinyon-juniper forests, sagebrush shrub, white fir and xeric shrub and blackbrush assessment types<sup>1</sup>. This area contains true Mojave Desert ecosystems which are largely intact, and vegetation includes Joshua trees, cholla cactus, creosote and canyon live oak. The area contains the northern-most population of silk tassel bush (uncommon on the east-side of the Sierra Nevada). Wildfire appears to be occurring within the natural fire regime. This area's vegetation also provides contiguous habitat and connectivity for wildlife.

## Current Uses

Livestock grazing occurs on the portions of the Olancha Grazing Allotment within the recommended area, while there is only incidental grazing on the portions of the Tunawee Grazing Allotment within the recommended area. There is no known range improvement associated with the allotments in the recommended area.

The area receives low amounts of recreation use including backpacking, day-hiking and hunting. The lower section of Haiwee Canyon Trail, the only forest system trail in the area, has been heavily damaged by flash floods in recent years. There is no known existing motorized use by the public in the area.

There are several improvements in the area that represents a departure from apparent naturalness:

- Los Angeles Department of Water and Power infrastructure near Haiwee Creek that may be within the recommended area.
- Water conveyance infrastructure near Olancha Pass Trailhead serving trailhead facilities, livestock facilities and domestic water supply that may be within recommended area.
- Water conveyance infrastructure near Talus Creek serving domestic water supply.
- Non-inventoried road located on the forest that provides access to water installations for private property use in Sage Flat area.

## Wilderness Characteristics and the Ability to Protect and Manage the Area so as to Preserve Wilderness Characteristics

The recommended area has high ecological integrity, and generally appears to reflect ecological conditions that would normally be associated with the area without human intervention. The invasive weed cheat grass, however, has become established in Haiwee Canyon. Some cheat grass may also be

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<sup>1</sup> The Forest Service assessment of terrestrial ecosystems for the forest plan revision process are derived from the Forest Terrestrial Ecological Unit Inventory ecological types, with several ecological types combined into each of the assessment types. Please refer to Inyo National Forest Assessment Topic Paper Chapter 1 (November 2013).

present in the pinyon-juniper forests. Other invasive species present in the area include: herb Sophia (*Descurainia sophia*), Russian thistle, red brome, saltcedar, sweetclover, tall tumbled mustard and annual rabbitsfoot grass.

The area provides good opportunities for solitude, primitive types of recreation and unconfined recreation. There is 1 forest system trail in the area, whose lower portion has largely been obliterated by flash floods. The steep terrain and lack of trails throughout most of the area would facilitate the current low number of visitors' experience of remoteness from the sights and sounds of people inside the wilderness. Visitors' sense of remoteness from occupied and modified areas outside the wilderness may be diminished along the area's eastern periphery by US Highway 395, which is between 1.5 and 2.5 miles from the eastern boundary.

This area's other features of value include: Mojave Desert and oak woodlands with high ecological integrity, rare plants Kern Canyon *clarkia* and Charlotte's *phacelia*, habitat for a butterfly species of concern, spring snails and the Kern slender salamander are of scientific value.

The The Inyo National Forest has the ability to preserve the area's wilderness characteristics primarily through the recommended boundary for the area. The adjacent South Sierra Wilderness to the west and Sacatar Trail Wilderness to the south offer reinforce the forest's ability to preserve the area's wilderness characteristics. The location of the boundary is intended to minimize the potential for incursions by motorized vehicles. There are 7 unauthorized routes along the eastern boundary of the recommended area that range from .2 miles to 1.4 miles in length. The unauthorized routes are expected to return to natural conditions through passive restoration processes.

## **Summary of Factors Considered in the Selection of this Area**

The Inyo National Forest recommends the South Sierra Addition as potential wilderness because of the following ecological and social characteristics:

- The intact condition and diversity of the ecosystem types.
- The area is adjacent to 2 designated wildernesses: South Sierra Wilderness and Sacatar Trail Wilderness. This addition would enhance habitat connectivity along the southern Sierra Nevada escarpment.
- There are good opportunities for solitude and primitive types of recreation in the area.
- The area represents a good opportunity to add underrepresented ecosystems to the National Wilderness Preservation System. Most of the area is comprised of pinyon-juniper forest, sagebrush shrub, or xeric shrub and blackbrush assessment types. These three assessment types consist of ecological groups that may be considered underrepresented in the National Wilderness Preservation System.