

# Overview of the Wilderness Evaluation Process

## Helena and Lewis & Clark National Forests

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The Wilderness Evaluation process as described in the 2012 Planning rule and directives is a process for identifying and evaluating lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. Land management planning process requirements are located within Forest Service Manual 1923 and in the Planning Rule. These requirements direct that “when developing a proposed new plan or proposed plan revision, the responsible official shall identify and evaluate lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System and determine whether to recommend any such lands to be designated as wilderness. See planning regulations (CFR §219.7(c)(2)(v)) and the Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.12, chapter 70 for direction and guidance for this process.

The Wilderness Evaluation process includes four primary steps: inventory, evaluation, analysis, and recommendation. Public engagement will take place both informally and formally throughout the steps of this process. Additionally, before information is shared with the public, it will be thoroughly vetted with Forest Service personnel to ensure accuracy.

### Step 1: Inventory

Identify areas and create an inventory of all lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). All lands, except those already included within the NWPS, will be assessed to determine whether they should be included in the inventory. *The intent of the inventory is to be broad and inclusive.* Inclusion or identification in the inventory is not a designation that conveys or requires a particular kind of management.

The inventory process is started by considering existing, relevant information identified during the assessment phase, including information about designated areas (such as inventoried roadless areas), transportation infrastructure (such as road maintenance levels), and past or pending wilderness recommendation proposals.

The following inventory criteria will be used:

- **Size Criteria**
  - Based off of direction in the Wilderness Act for size, include areas that:
    - Are 5,000 acres or more.
    - May be less than 5,000 acres but are of sufficient size to make practicable their preservation and use in an unimpaired condition. (i.e. adjacent to wilderness, existing recommended wilderness, or wilderness of other Federal ownership)
- **Improvement Criteria**

- Pursuant to the Wilderness Act, include those areas that have been “protected and managed so as to preserve the natural conditions which (1) generally appear to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable; and (2) have outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation.”
  - Road improvements that are included
    - Maintenance Level (ML) 1 roads
    - Routes that have been decommissioned, unauthorized, or are temporary or forest roads that have been identified for decommissioning or for reclassification in a previous decision document such as a travel management plan or travel analysis plan.
    - Forest roads that have been proposed as recommended wilderness as a result of previous forest planning process.
    - Forest roads that the responsible official merits for inclusion in the inventory as a result of public participation comments during the assessment or other public participation opportunity.
    - Historic wagon routes, historic mining routes, or other settlement era features considered a part of the historic and cultural landscape of the area.
    - ML 2 roads that do not meet the criteria for exclusion below.
  - Road improvements that are excluded
    - Permanently authorized roads validated by a Federal court or the Department of Interior for which a valid easement or interest has been properly recorded.
    - Forest roads maintained to levels 3, 4, and 5.
    - ML 2 roads, or ML 3, 4, and 5 roads that have been reclassified to ML2 through a previous decision document such as a travel management plan or a travel analysis plan that meet one or more of the following criteria:
      - Have been improved and are maintained by mechanical means to ensure regular and continued use.
      - Have cumulatively degraded wilderness character or precluded future preservation of the area as wilderness.
      - Have been identified for continued public access and use in a project level of travel planning decision supported by NEPA analysis, or

- Otherwise preclude evaluation and consideration of the area during the public participation and intergovernmental outreach process as potentially suitable for wilderness, based on the assessment information or on-the-ground-knowledge.
- Other Improvements
- Include such lands in the inventory where the other improvements or evidence of past human activities are not *substantially noticeable* in the area as a whole. Examples include:
    - Airstrips and heliports.
    - Vegetative treatments.
    - Timber harvest areas with logging and prior road construction.
    - Permanently installed vertical structures such as electronic installations that support television, radio, telephone or cellular communications, provided their impacts as well as their maintenance and access needs are minimal.
    - Active mining areas where impacts are not substantially noticeable.
    - Minor structural Range improvements (such as fences and water troughs) and nonstructural improvements (such as burning and spraying).
    - Recreation improvements such as occupancy spots or minor hunting or outfitter camps. Developed sites should not be included. Areas where minor, easily-removable recreation developments may be included.
    - Ground-return telephone lines, electric lines, and power lines if the right-of-ways have not been cleared should be included. Power lines with cleared right-of-ways, pipelines, and other permanently installed linear right-of-way structures should be excluded.
    - Watershed treatment areas such as contouring, diking, and channeling.
    - Lands adjacent to development or activities that impact opportunities for solitude. The fact that non-wilderness activities or uses can be seen or heard from within any portion of the area, must not, of itself, preclude inclusion in the inventory. It is

appropriate to extend boundaries to the edges of development for purposes of inclusion in the inventory.

- Structures, dwellings, and other relics of past occupation when they are considered part of the historical and cultural landscape of the area.
- Areas both with and without improvements that have been proposed by the Forest Service for consideration as recommended wilderness as a result of a previous Forest planning process. In the Helena and Lewis and Clark National Forests planning area there are 3 recommended wilderness areas that were identified as such in the 1986 Helena National Forest Plan. These areas should be included in the inventory.

Each area identified in the inventory will be recorded on a map. The map will include the following information:

1. Existing wilderness and primitive areas.
2. Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) or any proposal pending before Congress.
3. Areas identified in the Forest Service Roadless Area Conservation Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).
4. National Forest System lands statutorily designated for management for non-wilderness purposes.
5. Other areas the Responsible Official thinks will useful to facilitate effective and transparent public participation and input.

The Responsible Official shall ensure that the Forest Plan Revision team documents the process used to identify and inventory the areas. The inventory data will be vetted by Forest Service personnel to ensure accuracy. The inventory documentation and maps will then be released for informal public review. Both the internal Forest Service comments and the informal public comments will help to inform the next step: evaluation.

## **Step 2: Evaluation**

Pursuant to criteria set forth in the Wilderness Act of 1964, the wilderness characteristics of the lands included in the inventory will be evaluated. All lands identified must be evaluated but the Responsible Official may divide or consolidate land into grouped areas for the purpose of the evaluation.

The following evaluation criteria should be used. These criteria are directly tied to the language within the Wilderness Act:

- Evaluate the degree to which the area generally appears to be affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprints of man’s work substantially unnoticeable (naturalness characteristic).
- Evaluate the degree to which the area has outstanding opportunities for solitude or for a primitive and unconfined type of recreation.
- Evaluate how an area less than 5,000 acres is of sufficient size as to make it practicable for the preservation and use of the area in an unimpaired condition.
- Evaluate the degree to which the area may contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historic value.
- Evaluate the degree to which the area may be managed to preserve its wilderness characteristics.

The evaluation process will be documented and made available for public participation opportunities during the NEPA process, likely with the release of the Proposed Action. *The intent is to ensure that the process for inventory and evaluation is well documented and is transparent and accessible to the public.* The evaluation will be vetted by Forest Service personnel to ensure accuracy. The evaluation documentation and maps will then be released for informal public review of the Proposed Action.

### **Step 3: Analysis**

Based on the evaluation by resource specialists and input from public participation opportunities, the responsible official shall identify which specific areas, or portions thereof, from the evaluation to carry forward as recommended wilderness areas in one or more alternatives to be analyzed in the Draft EIS. Not all lands included in the inventory and evaluations are required to be carried forward in an alternative.

For those areas carried forward, documentation must include:

1. Name and number of acres to be considered for recommendation.
2. Location and a summarized description of a recommended boundary for each area.
3. Brief description of the general geography, topography, and vegetation of the recommended area.
4. A brief description of the current uses and management of the area.
5. A description of the wilderness characteristics and the ability to protect and manage the area to preserve its wilderness characteristics.
6. A brief summary of the factors considered and the process used in evaluating the area and developing alternatives.
7. A brief summary of the ecological and social characteristics that would provide the basis for the area’s suitability for inclusion in the NWPS.

What is being analyzed for inclusion as a recommended wilderness area may change by alternative in the Draft EIS. All information regarding recommended wilderness by alternative would be vetted by Forest Service personnel prior to public release. Public participation would not be separate and would be included within the overall public participation plan for the Draft EIS.

#### **Step 4: Recommendation**

A decision on specific areas to be recommended for inclusion into the NWPS will be made based on the analysis disclosure and on input received during public participation opportunities. The decision must include a summary of the information required in step 2 for each area recommended for inclusion in the NWPS, will be included in the plan revision FEIS, and will be a part of the Record of Decision (ROD).

The revised plan must include plan components to provide for the management of areas recommended for wilderness designation to protect and maintain the ecological and social characteristics that provide the basis for their suitability for wilderness.

In developing plan components, all management prescriptions must protect the social and ecological characteristics that provide the basis for wilderness designation. The following management prescriptions may be proposed:

1. Enhancing the ecological and social characteristics that provide the basis for wilderness designations;
2. Continue existing uses, provided that such uses do not prevent the protection and maintenance of the social and ecological characteristics that provide the basis for wilderness designation;
3. Alter existing uses, subject to valid existing rights; and,
4. Eliminate existing uses, except those uses subject to valid existing rights.