

Wilderness

INTRODUCTION

One designated wilderness area and portions of two others are found on the Boise, Payette, and Sawtooth National Forests. The Sawtooth Wilderness covers approximately 218,000 acres and is situated entirely on the Sawtooth National Forest. Portions of the Frank Church - River of No Return (FC-RONR) Wilderness are located on the Payette and Boise National Forests. These portions amount to approximately 768,000 acres and 64,000 acres, respectively and are administered by the Payette and Salmon-Challis National Forests. An estimated 24,000 acres of the Hells Canyon Wilderness are located on the Payette National Forest but are administered by the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest.

This section only addresses areas that have already been designated as wilderness. Potential additions to the National Wilderness Preservation System are presented and analyzed in the *Inventoried Roadless Areas* Section in this Chapter. Management within the wilderness areas is not a Forest Plan Revision topic. Management direction for these wilderness areas has been or is being determined in separate planning processes and is contained in a variety of planning documents:

- **FC-RONR Wilderness** – The Programmatic and Operational Management Plans for this area are currently being revised in a separate planning process. The 1990 FC-RONR Fire Management Plan is used to guide fire use within the area.
- **Hells Canyon Wilderness** – The Comprehensive Management Plan for the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area covers the wilderness and is currently being revised in a separate planning process.
- **Sawtooth Wilderness** – The management direction for the Management Unit Number 4A-6 (Sawtooth Wilderness) was recently revised by amendment to the existing Sawtooth Land and Resource Management Plan.

A number of wilderness-related topics are also addressed in other sections of this chapter:

- Areas recommended for wilderness designation are addressed in the *Inventoried Roadless Areas* section.
- Air quality issues related to Class 1 and 2 wilderness airsheds are addressed in the *Air Quality and Smoke Management* section.
- The effects of fire use within wilderness are considered in the *Fire Management* section.

- Noxious weed infestations, control strategies, and potential spread within wilderness areas are addressed in detail in the *Non-native Plants* section.

Issues and Indicators

Issue Statement – Forest Plan management strategies may affect wilderness resources.

Background to Issue - No significant issues related directly to wilderness resources were identified during public scoping or the DEIS public comment period. Because direction for wilderness management of the three wilderness areas is detailed in law, regulation, agency policy, and in specific management plans, management in the revision alternatives would not differ. The relative amount of activities and uses may, in some cases, vary somewhat by alternative. However, they are likely to be present to some extent in all alternatives. Significant effects to wilderness areas are not expected under any alternative nor are effects expected to differ by alternative. As a result, general potential effects common to all alternatives are listed and analyzed in this section.

Affected Area

The affected area for direct and indirect effects to wilderness resources is the wilderness areas administered by the three National Forests in the Ecogroup. The affected area for cumulative effects are all of the lands administered by the Boise, Payette, and Sawtooth National Forests.

CURRENT CONDITIONS

The Payette and Sawtooth National Forests manage all or part of two wilderness areas; Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness and Sawtooth Wilderness. A portion of the Hells Canyon Wilderness lies on the Payette National Forest and is managed by the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. Each designated wilderness is described below. Details about the current condition and management direction can be obtained from the documents listed below.

Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness

In 1980 the U.S. Congress created the River of No Return Wilderness, which in 1984 was renamed the Frank Church-River of No Return (FC-RONR) Wilderness. This area encompasses a total of about 2,418,000 acres across six national forests. However, through a formal agreement, only four Forests administer the Wilderness. The Salmon -Challis and Payette administer the Boise portion. The Payette portion is largely administered by the Payette. However, it includes a number of areas along the Middle Fork of the Salmon River and mainstem section of the Salmon that are administered by the Salmon Challis and the Nez Perce National Forests. The FC-RONR Wilderness represents the second-largest designated wilderness area in the contiguous 48 states. The estimated acreage of this area within the Southwest Idaho Ecogroup is as follows:

Boise National Forest	64,000
Payette National Forest	768,000

Management of the area is guided by the *FC-RONR Wilderness Plan*, approved in 1984. This plan was incorporated into the forest plans for the six national forests that encompass the area (Bitterroot, Boise, Challis, Nez Perce, Payette, and Salmon National Forests). The management plan and forest plans were amended in July 1994 to include terms and conditions regarding outfitter and guide operations. The management plan is currently being revised, and the most recent proposed direction is a supplemental draft environmental impact statement (EIS) released to the public in September 1999. A final EIS and decision are expected in 2003; until such time the current management plan guides management.

The FC-RONR Wilderness is noted for its steep, rugged mountains, and deep canyons. Elevations range from 2,000 feet along the main Salmon River, to over 10,300 feet in the highest peaks. Geological formations include river breaks and canyons (some up to 5,000 feet in depth), high mountains, rugged peaks, hot springs, and glaciated basins.

Elk, mule deer, whitetail deer, bighorn sheep, mountain goats, moose, black bear, and cougar are big-game species present in the area. Fish species present include chinook salmon, sockeye salmon, western cutthroat trout, bull trout, and rainbow trout. Fishing, backpacking, mountain climbing, and whitewater rafting are major attractions. The whitewater recreation experiences on the Salmon River (Congressionally designated “recreational” and “wild”) and Middle Fork Salmon (Congressionally designated “wild”) are popular features. Over 17,000 people float these two rivers each year.

Unique situations exist in the FC-RONR Wilderness as allowed and recognized uses under the 1980 Central Idaho Wilderness Act. The use of motorboats (including motorized jet boats) on the Salmon River and the landing of aircraft on thirty-one operational landing strips (16 public and 15 private) within the wilderness are both allowed under the legislation. Aircraft have provided access to and recreation in the wilderness for over 60 years. Given the ruggedness of the terrain, the long-established traditional aircraft use, and immense size of the area, aircraft have been and will continue to be a primary means of access and recreation in this Wilderness.

Other important current condition information for the wilderness as outlined in the DEIS (USDA Forest Service 1998) and Supplemental DEIS (USDA Forest Service 1999) includes:

- A total of 2,446 miles of trails exist in the wilderness,
- 302 noxious weed infestations occupy approximately 1,900 acres,
- Spotted knapweed is the greatest threat to native bunchgrass communities.

A complete description of the current condition, proposed management, and environmental consequences for management of the FC-RONRW are contained in the January 1998 FC-RONR

Wilderness Programmatic and Operational Management Plans Draft EIS and September 1999
Supplemental DEIS

Hells Canyon Wilderness

In 1975 the U.S. Congress created the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area (HCNRA) and the Hells Canyon Wilderness. The Oregon Wilderness Act of 1984 added Westside Reservoir Face, McGraw Creek, and part of Lick Creek to the Wilderness. The Hells Canyon Wilderness encompasses a total of 215,906 acres in Oregon and Idaho and is spread across the Wallowa-Whitman, Payette, and Nez Perce National Forests. When Congress established the HCNRA, the boundary included portions of the Nez Perce, Payette, and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests in Regions 1, 4, and 6, respectively. The Chief of the Forest Service decided that the area would be managed as one administrative unit in Region 6 by the Forest Supervisor of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. The Wallowa-Whitman National Forest is responsible for establishing programmatic direction for the management of the HCNRA and administers the Payette National Forest portion of the Wilderness (24,000 acres).

The Forest Plan (USDA Forest Service 1990) for the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, as amended, provides guidance through its established goals, objectives, desired future conditions, forest-wide standards and guidelines, and specific management area direction. The Forest Plan incorporates the 1982 Hells Canyon National Recreation Area Comprehensive Plan, subsequent *Forest Plan* amendments, and terms and conditions related to consultation in accordance with the *Endangered Species Act* to provide existing management direction for the HCNRA. The Hells Canyon National Recreation Area Comprehensive Plan is currently being revised as outlined in a Supplemental Draft EIS released to the public in February 2000. A final EIS and decision are expected in 2003; until such time, the current management plan guides management.

The diverse area ranges between 1,400 and 9,300 feet in elevation separated on the Oregon/Idaho state border by the Snake River. The Idaho portion is characterized by three geologic-vegetative conditions. The upper areas are alpine and subalpine with several lakes and geologic formations of glacial origin. Vegetation is sparse and broken by large areas of rock. The middle portions contain dense forests of larch, lodgepole pine, and true firs. Lower elevations are characterized by dry, rocky, barren, steep slopes breaking into the Snake River and its major tributaries. Trees are sparse and consisting mostly of ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir.

The Oregon portion is characterized by steep breakland areas composed of extremely rugged and steep terrain, including the near-vertical rock cliffs of Hells Canyon. Trees are scattered throughout but concentrated on north slopes and stream bottoms where ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir dominate.

Wilderness use is heaviest in the Seven Devils Mountains of Idaho, with its many lakes being the main attraction. Hunting for elk, deer, and chukar is popular in both Oregon and Idaho. Oregon recreation use is concentrated on the Snake River, Mid-Bench, and Freezeout Trails.

The Snake River system continues to support important runs of chinook salmon and steelhead trout. It was once the most important production area for anadromous fish in the Columbia River system. Present runs of these fish declined from historical numbers largely as the result of construction and operation of dams. At least eighty percent of the Snake River drainage formerly used by fall chinook salmon for spawning and rearing, and greater than fifty percent of the spawning and rearing habitat used by other anadromous species, have been eliminated (USDA Forest Service 1996).

Elk, mule deer, whitetail deer, bighorn sheep, mountain goats, black bear, cougar, blue and ruffed grouse, spruce grouse, golden and bald eagles are present in the area. Bald eagles are present and are a threatened species in Oregon and Idaho. Fishing, backpacking, mountain climbing, and whitewater rafting are major attractions.

A complete description of the current condition, proposed management, and environmental consequences for management of the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area is contained in the February 2000 Supplemental DEIS Hells Canyon National Recreation Area Comprehensive Management Plan.

Sawtooth Wilderness

In 1972 the U.S. Congress created the Sawtooth Wilderness, which encompasses about 218,000 acres across the Sawtooth and Boise National Forests. Management of the area is guided by the Amendment to the Sawtooth National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan—Sawtooth Wilderness Management Direction, approved in September 1997.

The wilderness is comprised of hundreds of jagged peaks, 40 over 10,000 feet in height, with nearly 400 high alpine lakes dotting the predominantly rocky terrain. Elevation ranges from 5,000 feet to just under 11,000 feet. Hidden within its boundaries are deep, secluded, tree-covered valleys. This area serves as the headwaters of four major rivers including the Salmon River. The wilderness is characterized by granitic glaciated lands, moraine lands, and high, steep ridges and peaks.

The Sawtooth Wilderness, primarily because of its proximity to expanding population bases (Salt Lake City, Boise, Ketchum-Sun Valley, Twin Falls) the promotion of its spectacular scenery, and its easy accessibility, has seen an increase in visitation of 60 percent in the past 20 years. About 90 percent of use occurs between July 1 and September 15.

There are 40 system trails totaling 247 miles within the wilderness boundary, the majority of which were constructed or reconstructed in the 1960s. The wilderness is accessed by 23 trailheads. Of an estimated 34,000 annual visitors, more than 50 percent enter from only four trailheads. Eighty percent of visitors surveyed (Boyd 1995) responded that they participated in hiking on trails, backpacking, and seeking solitude.

Vegetation ranges from sagebrush to whitebark pine, and there are no known threatened or endangered plant species in the wilderness.

Elk, mule deer, mountain goats, moose, black bear, and cougar are present in the area. The area provides habitat for threatened and endangered species including the gray wolf, Canada lynx, and peregrine falcon. This area also provides high water quality for important fisheries downstream, including endangered sockeye salmon, and threatened chinook salmon, steelhead trout, and bull trout. Many high alpine lakes also provide important recreational fisheries of introduced species such as westslope cutthroat trout, eastern brook trout, golden trout, rainbow trout, and grayling.

A complete description of the current condition, environmental consequences of alternative management strategies, and current management direction for the Sawtooth Wilderness are contained in the 1997 Amendment to The Sawtooth National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, Sawtooth Wilderness Management Direction, Environmental Assessment.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

Effects Common to All Alternatives

Resource Protection Methods

Human use of designated wilderness is governed largely by the terms of the Wilderness Act. This serves to limit management activities within wilderness to a large extent relative to non-wilderness areas. Wilderness areas within the Ecogroup are managed and regulated in an effort to limit human impacts and influences to desired limits. Project proposals within these areas are evaluated for compliance with wilderness values. Commercial uses of wilderness are controlled by special use permits and the operations plans that are required under the special use permits.

Direct and Indirect Effects

Because direction for wilderness management of the three wilderness areas is detailed in law, regulation, agency policy, and in specific management plans, management in the revision alternatives would not differ. The relative amount of activities and uses may, in some cases, vary somewhat by alternative. However, they are likely to be present to some extent in all alternatives. Significant effects to wilderness areas are not expected under any alternative nor are effects expected to differ by alternative. As a result, general potential effects common to all alternatives are listed and analyzed in this section.

Disturbance Events – Wilderness resources are managed to promote natural, ecological processes. As such, management intent in wilderness areas is to allow disturbance events (for example, fire, insects, and disease) to play a role within wilderness areas under prescribed circumstances. Exceptions to this general direction can occur when these disturbance events threaten resources and properties within or outside the wilderness boundaries.

The objective of wilderness management is to manage physical and biological components to allow natural processes to perpetuate the included ecosystems. One of the primary ecological processes is disturbance by fire. Present conditions vary depending upon the amount of fire use and location. Fires have been actively suppressed in some areas, and this exclusion has produced vegetative conditions that are outside of the historical range of variability. It is possible that the most serious adverse impact to wilderness resources has been the suppression of fire.

Two vegetation management tools available inside wilderness areas are wildland fire use for resource benefits and prescribed fire. These fires can be used to achieve desired conditions when conducted under prescriptive criteria defined in Fire Management Plans. In some areas, prescribed fire could be used to reduce risks of damage to private property and important cultural resources from undesirable fires while also contributing to the restoration of ecological processes. Fire use could also contribute to moving toward or maintaining desired vegetative conditions.

Potential direct effects of wildland fire and prescribed fire could include a temporary loss of vegetation, reduction in water quality due to sedimentation, reduced soil productivity, loss of cultural resources, loss of grazing opportunities, air pollution, and a perceived loss in scenic quality. Wilderness users could expect temporary access restrictions during periods of fire use activities.

Indirect effects of fire use may include a temporary loss of wildlife habitat for some species, or additional habitat for others. Recreational use of burned-over areas may drop for a period of years until vegetative recovery achieves a more advanced stage. Lethal fire in heavy timber stands would also increase long-term trail maintenance needs from continued downfall of snags across trails.

Timber Management – Timber harvest is not permitted within wilderness areas. Logging activities near wilderness boundaries have the potential to create short-term noise level increases that change the user's perception of being in a remote area. Reduced vegetative cover and skid trails may also increase access into adjacent wilderness areas. Improved access may result in increased recreation use.

Roads - Construction, reconstruction, and decommissioning roads near wilderness boundaries can potentially affect wilderness resources in that they may have affects on wilderness accessibility. Road-building activities near wilderness boundaries have the potential, in some types of terrain and vegetative cover, to increase inappropriate wilderness use by creating motorized entry points. In the short term, increased noise levels change the user's perception of being in a remote area. Improved access may result in increased recreation use, while reducing access in adjacent areas, through road decommissioning, may result in reduced recreation use.

Recreation – Additional recreation use of wilderness areas is expected to increase under all alternatives along with non-wilderness areas. Corresponding increases in recreation-associated impacts to Wilderness resources can also be expected. Wilderness education will be emphasized in an effort to protect wilderness values, including signing at trailheads, public programs and brochures, and personal contacts by wilderness personnel. Full implementation budget levels are needed to implement these programs and achieve a satisfactory level of success. More intensive management of recreation use is

likely to occur, which may result in the loss of some types of opportunities. In some cases, additional regulation and regulation enforcement will be needed to protect wilderness values.

Range Management – Where it currently exists, livestock grazing would continue in wilderness areas in accordance with Congressional guidelines. Because grazing is permitted within wilderness by the Wilderness Act, vacant allotments are recommended for closure based on range capability, not on wilderness considerations.

Mineral and Energy Exploration and Development – Designated wilderness is withdrawn from energy leasing and mineral entry, subject to existing rights. No leasing or oil or gas exploration and drilling activity is expected under any alternative. Mining activities can result in both short-term and long-term effects from associated structures, roads, vegetation clearing, and general ground-disturbing activities. The values for which an area is classified as wilderness could be greatly affected or lost. Effects would include disruption of natural ecological processes, alteration of the primitive setting, elimination of opportunities for solitude, introduction of disruptive noises and sights, and reduction of economic benefits from the area's value as wilderness. The effects on wilderness resources would vary depending largely on the scale and location of development. Small-scale developments of a few acres, or underground mining, would have very limited impacts, while large-scale surface mining operations would typically have major effects on correspondingly larger portions of the wilderness. Reclamation to pre-activity conditions may not be possible in some locations, creating a potential for permanent alteration of the physical setting. In that the level of mineral exploration and development is largely driven by market forces and regulated by existing mining law, there would be little difference between the alternatives in effects on the wilderness areas.

Landownership Adjustments – Generally, landownership adjustments within designated wilderness are made in order to acquire private inholdings. These are usually done to protect or maintain wilderness values from the threat of development resulting in long-term benefits for wilderness resources. In that landownership adjustments are generally a function of opportunities that are not related to Forest Plan management direction, there would be little difference between the alternatives in effects on the wilderness areas.

Cumulative Effects

Despite the effects of fire exclusion in some locations, generally, wilderness areas are in much better ecological condition than non-wilderness areas. As large tracts of relatively undisturbed land, they contribute to maintaining biological diversity while maintaining habitat connectivity. This is especially true with an area the size of the FC-RONR Wilderness. These wilderness areas have played a role in maintaining strongholds of a number of threatened, endangered, and sensitive aquatic species such as chinook salmon, steelhead trout, and bull trout. This role is likely to only increase in importance as recovery efforts for these fish species are implemented.

No Forest Plan alternative would change the amount of existing wilderness that occurs within the Ecogroup, the State of Idaho, or the National Wilderness Preservation System. Currently, the

Ecogroup Forests contribute almost 36 percent of designated wilderness within Idaho, and less than 1 percent of National Wilderness.