

# WILDERNESS EVALUATION

## GOVERNMENT MEADOWS - 0605001

### 710 Acres

556 acres (Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest)  
 154 acres (Wenatchee National Forest)

### OVERVIEW

#### History

The area has not been previously inventoried as an inventoried roadless area. The area was added to the inventory due to being adjacent to the Norse Peak Wilderness. It meets the criteria for a Potential Wilderness Area (PWA) as described in Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.12 Chapter 70.

Table 1 below, shows the Land and Resource Management Plan direction for the 2006 potential wilderness area:

**Table 1 – Management area acreages (rounded)**

Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie (1990)		Wenatchee (1990)	
	acres		acres
<b>MA 1B, Semi-primitive non-motorized Dispersed Recreation and LSR</b>	<b>326</b>	<b>Semi-primitive non-motorized and LSR (ST1)</b>	<b>159</b>
<b>Late Successional Reserve</b>	<b>229</b>		

#### Location and Access

The expansive Government Meadows straddles the Cascade crest at Naches Pass. This PWA is essentially the entire section 34 in township 19 N., Range 11 E., WM, and straddles the corners of Kittitas, King, and Pierce counties. Historic Naches Pass is located on the eastern edge of this PWA, on the Cascade crest. Access is provided from the west over State Route 410 and Forest Road 70. From the east, access is off of SR 410 and Forest Road 19.

Very few of the passes through the Cascade Range cross flat ground similar to Naches Pass. Certainly, the Longmire Party of pioneers was at least temporarily thrilled to find this easy terrain after forging through the thick forests of the Naches River. The steep descent to the Greenwater River must have quickly dampened any temporary enthusiasm that the party had when making the first crossing of the pass in 1853.

## **Geography and Topography**

The topography of the area ranges from very nearly flat, in Government Meadows, to gently rolling. Elevations range from 4,600 to 5,200 feet.

## **Current Uses**

The Naches Trail #1175, which runs east-to-west through the center of the area, is a popular jeep trail (see: <http://www.off-road.com/toyota/trips/naches.html> ). The trail roughly follows the path of the Longmire Party, which first crossed Naches Pass with covered wagons in 1853. The Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail (PCNST) runs through the center of the area (from south to north) and is heavily used by hikers and equestrians. The Government Meadows area is one of the most popular snowmobiling areas in western Washington. Snowmobile organizations, in partnership with the Forest Service, rebuilt a warming hut (Urich Cabin) near the center of the area in the early 1990s. Berry picking and hunting are other popular pastimes in the area. No livestock grazing is permitted in the area.

## **Appearance and Surroundings**

Roughly two-thirds of the Government Meadows area is covered by subalpine forest, primarily silver and subalpine fir; the remainder is an open meadow, which straddles the crest of the Cascade Range.

The south boundary of the area abuts the Norse Peak Wilderness. Its western and northern boundaries are adjacent to sections acquired by the federal government as part of the Huckleberry Land Exchange (ROD signed April 6, 2001). Refer to the 1990 Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie Land and Resource Management Plan and all applicable amendments for more information. The former private land surrounding this PWA includes a legacy of roads and clear-cut areas.

## **Key Attractions**

The Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail and the Naches Trail are notable attractions, as is the Urich Cabin.

## ***CAPABILITY FOR WILDERNESS***

### **Level of natural and undeveloped environment:**

This is a small, 713-acre area located adjacent to the north side of the Norse Peak Wilderness.

Because of its small size, partial border with private land (north and east), proximity to roads on the northern boundary, and the presence of a jeep trail through the area there is audible traffic noise from most locations within this small area.

Overall, the Government Meadows PWA retains a natural appearance, though there has been significant modification by humans. The area is popular and very accessible to a variety of year-round recreational activities.

No portion of this potential wilderness area (PWA) has been directly impacted by road construction or logging. However, the area was (pre-exchange) surrounded on three sides by private lands (Weyerhaeuser and Plum Creek), which were roaded and logged.

Tansy Ragwort is known to inhabit areas on the north and east side of Section 34 along Forest Roads 70 and 7080. No surveys of noxious weeds have been conducted within this PWA to verify their presence.

The Government Meadows PWA is impaired by light pollution. The entire PWA rates a Class 3 on the Bortle Scale. A Class 3 Rural Sky has some indication of light pollution on the horizon. Clouds may appear faintly illuminated in the brightest parts of the sky near the horizon, but are dark overhead. The Milky Way still appears complex. Light domes from population centers may appear on the horizon (10-15 degrees above horizon). Visual observing is still relatively unimpaired. Time lapse photography could be impaired by light pollution.

Water quality data is not available for most of the PWA; however, due to the relatively low level of disturbance water quality is assumed to be high.

### **Level of outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation:**

This area is adjacent to the 52,180-acre Norse Peak Wilderness; however, the area receives significantly different use than most of the adjacent, more rugged, Norse Peak Wilderness, and issues differ as well. The flatness of this area, the logging-tattered western edge, and its proximity to heavily-roaded areas means that no part of Government Meadows potential wilderness area is more than one-half mile from a road. With motorized use on the road system, the Naches Pass jeep trail, and winter snowmobile use visitors may hear motor vehicles of one type or another during most of the year. Sound carries well over the flat terrain as there are few natural features to block or deflect sounds. The area lies almost directly under the flight path into and out of Seattle-Tacoma International Airport for flights heading to, or originating from cities to the southeast of Seattle. This results in a nearly constant aircraft presence over this area. Easy road access to the Naches Pass area means that people are almost constantly in the area, experiencing a variety of activities and recreation opportunities. Due to these factors, the opportunities for solitude are nearly non-existent.

### **Special Features**

Portions of the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail and the historic Naches Pass Trail are within this area. Government Meadows is located near secluded areas where numerous unconfirmed gray wolf sightings have been recorded through the years.

Naches Pass is well known among Indian tribal informants as a cross-Cascade travel route prior to Euro-American exploration and settlement in Washington State. Naches Pass was part of an extensive trade network among Indians from the east and west sides of the mountains.

The Naches Pass Trail may be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places for its significant association with prehistoric and ethno-historic travel and trade route and for its importance to Indian people in activities of resource procurement, as well as for its

importance as a early wagon road and association with the Longmire Party (which came across Naches Pass in 1853). Investigations of prehistory in the vicinity of this PWA reveal that a number of sites are associated with the Naches Pass Trail, though none within the PWA have been subject to in-depth research.

### **Manageability of Boundaries**

The area could easily be added to the Norse Peak Wilderness; however, ability to manage it as such would be extremely difficult. Historic use of much of the area by snowmobiles, four-wheel drive vehicles, and motorbikes would be difficult to exclude, due to the flat and relatively open nature of the terrain. This use is not just incidental motorized recreation use, as it occurs on part of the established trail system. Government Meadows is very popular among motorized recreationists and there are very few other such areas open for this use in western Washington. Due to the terrain, maze of roads surrounding the area, and the open nature of Government Meadows, it would be extremely difficult to keep snowmobiles from entering and exiting the area.

## **AVAILABILITY FOR WILDERNESS**

### **Recreation**

Former private land owners around the Government Meadows built an extensive network of roads and harvested the dense stands of timber in the area of Naches Pass. Initial recreation use focused on the Naches Pass Trail, as jeepers used this route as a challenging drive to Naches Pass. A trail was built through the center of the area, initially called the Cascade Crest, and later the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail (PCNST). The trail is now used by several thousand hikers and equestrians each year. For many PCNST users, Government Meadows is an end point for extended trail trips along this part of the trail: south of Government Meadows, the trail passes through thousands of acres of protected lands. However, north of Government Meadows, the PCNST passes through mixed public and private ownership that continues north to Snoqualmie Pass. The section north of this PWA is known as one of the worst sections of the entire PCNST to hike due to extensive logging on private lands, lack of scenic vistas (except in clearcut areas), and numerous downed logs. As a result, Government Meadows is the northern terminus for many trips along the PCNST.

Snowmobile use began increasing in popularity in the 1960s. The extensive road system and generally moderate terrain in the area allowed for excellent opportunities for snowmobiling. The Pyramid Creek Sno-Park, located about six miles west of this area, is one of the most heavily used snowmobile trailheads in the State of Washington. Forest Road 70, from the Sno-Park, climbs quickly from an elevation of about 2,500 feet to nearly 5,000 feet where the winter snow pack is usually about 10 feet deep. The deep snow covers all the stumps from past harvest and turns the many clear-cut areas along the crest into fantasy rides for snowmobile enthusiasts. The west-side road system connects to the east-side road system, providing snowmobile access into a huge area between Naches and Cle Elum.

Government Meadows is located at a central location where snowmobile groups were interested in constructing a warming hut for use as a stop-over or to provide a shelter in the event of emergencies. In the early 1990s, the clubs, in partnership with the Forest Service rebuilt Ulrich Cabin to fulfill this need. Logs for the cabin were flown into the site by helicopter and the cabin was assembled by volunteers.

Easy access and 5,000 foot elevation also makes the area popular for berry picking. Deer and elk hunting are also popular in the area; the many clearcut areas currently offer good forage for these animals and younger plantations good thermal cover. The section to the immediate west of this PWA, which was acquired from Weyerhaeuser Company in the Huckleberry Land Exchange, is allocated to special management for elk summer range. There are no lakes in the area for fishing.

Snowmobiling and motorized use opportunities on the west side of the Cascade Range are very limited, due to terrain and the large wilderness areas. Naches Pass and the Government Meadows area is one of the most popular areas for these activities and designation as wilderness would further reduce these already limited opportunities.

The Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail comprises approximately 1.2 miles of non-motorized trail, and 1.1 miles of motorized trail is for 4x4 use.

Tourism marketing in the Yakima and Naches area emphasizes agrotourism and visiting wineries. The Naches Valley Chamber of Commerce website portrays the area as offering scenic drives on Highways 410 and 12, snow skiing, river rafting, hiking, hunting, snowmobiling, and bird watching. Links are provided to Forest Service web-based information. The Naches Pass Historic Trail is directly promoted for its historic values.

Tourism-based use of this area currently includes snowmobiling, 4x4 use, and visitation to the area as a historical site. Wilderness designation would affect these uses by displacing them to adjacent roaded areas.

**Table 2--Miles of recreation trails**

Motorized Trails	Non-motorized Trails	Snowmobile Trails
1	1	0

**Wildlife**

This area is inhabited by numerous forest animals including black bear, cougar and summering deer and elk. Forest birds such as blue grouse and neotropical migrants associated with meadows inhabit this area. The riparian area along Meadow Creek provides habitat for ruffed grouse.

Government Meadows is located near secluded areas where numerous gray wolf sightings have been recorded through the years. The large meadow complex surrounded by forested stands make for ideal elk summer foraging areas. The forested stand also provides for northern spotted owl habitat. No other threatened or endangered wildlife species have been documented in this area.

## **Water and Fish**

Meadow Creek drains west into the Greenwater River. There are no fish populations present. The Greenwater River flows into the White River at Greenwater, Washington. The White is a major river with its source in Emmons Glacier on Mt. Rainier. A flood control dam, Mud Mountain Dam is located downstream, as well as a diversion which leads to Lake Tapps. The lake is a water source for the southern Puget Sound area; until recently, Tacoma Public Utility Department operated a hydro project from water out of this lake. There are no power withdrawals, or known Federal Energy Regulatory Commission projects licensed or under consideration in the area.

One small headwater tributary of the North Fork Little Naches lies within the evaluation area and on the Naches Ranger District. This stream, which flows to the northeast, has a steep gradient and likely is above the distribution of fish in the North Fork Little Naches River. Downstream reaches of the North Fork Little Naches River are very significant for steelhead spawning in the Naches River drainage.

The Government Meadows PWA has a water source protection area totaling 71 acres that contributes to a community water system for the City of Yakima Water Division.

## **Range**

The area has no suitable range for sheep or cattle or authorized range allotments.

## **Vegetation and Ecology**

Government Meadows is in a subalpine meadow area at an elevation of approximately 4,800 feet with forested patches and stringers composed of primarily of subalpine fir, Pacific silver fir, and mountain hemlock. The meadows contain forbs, grasses, sedges, and rushes typical of wet subalpine meadows in this part on the Cascades. The forested area surrounding the meadow is in the Pacific silver fir series, it is late successional and consists of large trees with canopy closures of 70 percent or greater. The primary tree species include Pacific silver fir, subalpine fir, mountain hemlock, western hemlock, and Engelmann spruce. The understory shrub component is dominated by big huckleberry (*Vaccinium membranaceum*) and Cascade azalea (*Rhododendron albiflorum*).

Government Meadows is in a section of checkerboard that is bordered on three sides by non-Forest Service land that is very heavily roaded and has been almost entirely clear cut.

No vegetation management treatments are expected in the old growth portion of this area, thus no opportunities would be lost should the area be added to Norse Peak Wilderness.

## ***Timber Harvest Suitability***

The underlying criteria for determining timber harvest suitability are found in the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974, 36CFR219.12, and Forest Service Handbook 1909.12, Chapter 60.

For the Colville and Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forests, the general criteria for timber suitability that will be used for timber harvest suitability are:

- Is it forest land (10 percent crown cover minimum, productivity >20 ft<sup>3</sup>/ac/yr).
- The area has not been withdrawn from timber harvest or production.

- Soil, slope, or other watershed conditions will not be irreversibly damaged (based on soil attributes for erosion, instability, or compaction potential, slopes >65 percent, and certain land types)
- Reforestation can be assured within five years (lack of shallow soils, low frost heave potential, low surface rock, plant community type, certain land types, and elevation <5,500 feet)
- Economic and technologic viability (<0.5 miles from existing transportation system, species value or condition, volume availability, logging systems)

In consideration of all the criteria for determining timber harvest or timber production suitability and not just the fact that harvestable species can grow at a specific location, it appears this PWA does not have conditions that pass all the criteria. The main criterion for failure is that unacceptable resource impacts would likely occur due to road construction activities. This does not preclude helicopter operations that could fly material over sensitive areas to adjacent road systems. However, in most if not all cases helicopter logging and the associated expenses (such as manual slash treatments) would not be an economically viable option.

**Table 3--Stand data percentages**

Suitable for Timber Harvest	Forest Groups (Wenatchee)		WUI	
	0%	Parkland	0%	Total WUI
Cold Dry		0%	WUI in Dry and Mesic Forest	0%
Cold Moist		100%		
Mesic		0%		
Dry		0%		
Non-forest		0%		

***Fire***

Due to the high elevation and flat terrain of this area, wild fires have been relatively rare. The major fire scars in the area are from campfires primarily in the vicinity of Urich Cabin. This area lies adjacent to private land on the east side of Section 34 (Plum Creek). Fire return intervals here are very long and fuel accumulations are normal for this type of area.

Based on the area’s proximity to private land and adjacent commercial forest land, the current fire suppression strategy is to control any wildfire ignition. Due to the area being nearly surrounded by large clearcuts and roads and with a big meadow area in its midst, wildfire could be controlled without great difficulty. Application and use of unplanned ignitions (i.e. lightning and human-caused) to accomplish other resource objectives are not permitted under the current management direction.

Fuel reduction projects within this area are not anticipated at this time.

***Insects and Disease***

The Wilderness Act of 1964 allows for the control of insects and disease, but taking such actions in wilderness is rare. Forest Service wilderness policy (Forest Service Manual

2324.11) directs the agency “to allow indigenous insect and plant diseases to play, as nearly as possible their natural ecological role”. Policy also directs the agency to “protect the scientific value of observing the effect of insects and disease on ecosystems and identifying genetically resistant plant species”, and finally, “to control insect and plant disease epidemics that threaten adjacent lands or resources.”

An aerial survey of this PWA was completed in 2007. No insect and disease issues were identified.

### ***Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive Plants***

There are no known records of sensitive plant species at this location.

### ***Noxious Weeds***

There are no surveyed noxious weed species within this PWA. Tansy Ragwort is established along the roads that border the PWA.

### **Minerals and Soils**

Rocks in the area are predominantly of volcanic origin: some consist of rhyolite, dacite, andesite, and basalt lava flows; and some consist of tuffaceous and volcanoclastic sedimentary deposits that were later indurated into relatively hard, durable volcanic rocks. The White River fault transects just north of this area from southeast to northwest. The entire area is underlain by the Oligocene Ohanapecosh Formation, while the northern portion is also underlain by the less altered and younger volcanic rocks of the Miocene Fifes Peak Formation. The upper soils are primarily derived from volcanic ash which coats the area. Deeper soils are made up of a colluvium derived from the parent volcanic rocks. The area has fairly deep soils throughout and there are few bedrock outcrops.

The area is not encumbered by oil and gas or geothermal leases. There are no lease applications under review and there is no current industry interest in the area. The area has a low to moderate potential for the occurrence of oil and gas and geothermal resources. According to Bureau of Land Management (BLM) mining claim database (<http://www.blm.gov/lr2000/>) there have been no mining claims located in the area since prior to 1977, which is as far back as the BLM's records go. The area has a low potential for the occurrence of hard rock minerals.

### **Cultural and Heritage Resources**

Naches Pass is well known among Indian tribal informants as a cross-Cascade travel route prior to Euro-American exploration and settlement in Washington state. Naches Pass was part of an extensive trade network among Indians from the east and west sides of the mountains.

The Naches Pass Trail may be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places for its significant association with prehistoric and ethno-historic travel and trade route and for its importance to Indian people in activities of resource procurement, as well as for its importance as a early wagon road and association with the Longmire Party (which came across Naches Pass in 1853). Investigations of prehistory in the vicinity of this PWA reveal

that a number of sites are associated with the Naches Pass Trail, though none within the PWA have been subject to in-depth research.

Wilderness designation would not preclude archaeological research or ethnographic studies of the area to determine its historic significance. Current activities, primarily from 4-wheel drive vehicles and motorbikes, damage archeological resources and have affected the integrity of this section of the Naches Pass Trail. Wilderness designation would prevent further damage to heritage sites from these activities. Unless a site has been determined to be ineligible for the National Register, it is managed as a significant site until such a determination is made.

### **Land Uses and Special Uses**

The area has no authorized activities under special use permit.

The Government Meadows Potential Wilderness Area falls entirely within lands ceded to the U.S. Government under the Yakama Treaty. Indian tribes hold rights reserved under treaty and recognized in statutes, executive orders, and policies. Generally, these included rights to fish at usual and accustomed grounds and stations, the right to hunt and gather on open and unclaimed lands, the right to erect temporary houses to cure fish, and the right to pasture horses and cattle on open and unclaimed lands.

### **Private Lands**

There are no private lands within this PWA.

## ***NEED FOR WILDERNESS***

### **Location and size of other wildernesses in the general vicinity, and distance from proposed area and population centers:**

The area is located about 40 miles southeast of the city of Tacoma and 60 miles northwest of Yakima.

This PWA lies in a section of unharvested national forest lands immediately adjacent to the northern boundary of the existing Norse Peak Wilderness Area (52,180 acres). The area also lies at the northern edge of a block of protected land that includes Norse Peak Wilderness, seven other national forest wilderness areas and Mount Rainier National Park (228,480 acres). Together, these areas total about 670,000 acres.

In ranking this PWA for its potential to provide a high quality wilderness recreation setting it ranked as high due to adjoining the Norse Peak Wilderness. Wilderness designation would protect the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail. The PWA provides high quality scenery and an interesting historical setting (the Naches Pass Trail) that would attract wilderness users. However, access to Government Meadows is quite remote, which would limit the level of visitation.

**Present visitor pressure on other wildernesses, and trends and changing patterns of use:**

Several of these areas (Goat Rocks, Mt. Adams, William O. Douglas, Norse Peak, and Mt. Rainier) are heavily used by recreationists. All are located within a two-hour drive from the large cities in southern Puget Sound, and are even closer for visitors driving up the east side from the Yakima area. These existing wilderness areas provide high-quality opportunities for unconfined recreation.

Outside of the wilderness areas, on the nearby White River, Naches-Tieton, and Cowlitz Valley Ranger District, is one of the most extensive road networks in the National Forest system. These roads provide tremendous opportunities for driving for pleasure, dispersed recreation, and many other activities based on a roaded natural setting.

**Extent to which non-wilderness lands provide opportunities for unconfined outdoor recreation experiences:**

Inclusion of the Government Meadows PWA as wilderness would enhance opportunities for unconfined outdoor recreation by preserving the primitive recreation setting along the Pacific Crest Trail. The primary use of the area is currently 4x4 use.

The Mount Baker-Snoqualmie and the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forests provide a variety of roadless areas that are not designated wilderness. Some portions of these areas allow motorized use, whereas other areas are non-motorized. There is not a scarcity of opportunities for unconfined outdoor recreation experiences on these Forests.

Wilderness designation would lend protection to the historic wagon trail.

**The need to provide a sanctuary for those biotic species that have demonstrated an inability to survive in less than primitive surroundings or the need for a protected area for other unique scientific value or phenomena:*****Wildlife***

The Government Meadows area may provide a small amount of security habitat or sanctuary. The northern spotted owl and gray wolves need expansive primitive surroundings. The vast majority of such lands lie just to the south. The nearly constant presence of people in Government Meadows would act to significantly decrease the desirability of the area to such animals.

***Fish***

Several native species in the interior Columbia River Basin have demonstrated an inability to survive in less than primitive surroundings, especially the bull trout. In addition to habitat changes on National Forest System lands, other factors off forest such as hydropower generation, hatchery programs, harvest, and changing ocean conditions further challenge the persistence of some far-ranging native species. Broad-scale assessments have demonstrated a positive correlation between unroaded areas and persisting native fish stocks. Often, assessments like these don't differentiate between wilderness and roadless

areas; rather they combine the two into an “unroaded” category. These assessments show current strongholds (most secure and robust populations) are dependant on wilderness and roadless areas. Some of the more resilient native fish populations in the Interior Columbia Basin are located in unroaded areas on National Forest System lands.

For the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest PWAs were assigned an aquatic ranking based on federally listed and sensitive fish species that are sensitive to human disturbances. A high ranking was assigned when listed fish species occur in the PWA or when ecological process including high quality water help sustain listed fish species downstream of the PWA. All other PWAs are ranked low. This PWA is assigned a low ranking based on these factors.

### ***Rare Plant Species***

An analysis was completed that prioritized which PWAs would contribute the most to providing refugia for those plant species on the species of interest/species of concern (SOI/SOC) list. The analysis ranked three factors. The first factor, the total number of sites occurring within the PWA, ranked as low for this PWA. The second factor, which also ranked as low for this PWA, examined the degree of rarity of any SOI/SOC species present, and recognized the importance of individual PWAs in supporting a high incidence of populations relative to Washington state as a whole.

PWAs are generally unsurveyed for rare plants due to a relative lack of projects occurring in these areas. Thus an additional factor examined the potential for the PWA to support SOI/SOC species. Based on databases, first the SOI/SOC plant species were identified that are present within a five-mile radius of the PWA, but are not known to occur within the PWA. Then the PWA was analyzed to see if the potential habitat for these species occurs within the PWA. Based on this analysis, this PWA ranks as low.

Finally, a composite score was assigned to each PWA based on combining each of the rankings described above. This PWA ranks overall as low priority for preserving rare plant refugia with a wilderness designation.

### **Ability to provide for preservation of identifiable landform types and ecosystems:**

This area represents the both the West Cascades and East Cascades Ecoregions. These ecoregion types are well represented in existing wilderness lands in the Cascade Range.

There are no under-represented land types or ecosystems in this area.