

## Frequently Asked Questions - Potential Wilderness Evaluation

### **What prompted the Coconino National Forest to evaluate new potential wilderness areas?**

The Coconino National Forest is required to conduct an evaluation of potential wilderness areas as part of its Forest Plan revision process. This requirement is stipulated in [Section 217.17](#) of the 1982 rule provisions, which states, "...[unroaded] areas within the National Forest System shall be evaluated and considered for recommendation as potential wilderness areas during the forest planning process..."

### **How were these areas selected, and what is considered in the evaluation of these areas as potential wilderness?**

The potential wilderness areas were identified and evaluated according to the process stipulated in agency guidance ([Forest Service Handbook 1909.12](#) Chapter 70). The identification and evaluation process includes four major steps: "inventory" (identifying lands that meet the statutory definition of wilderness), "capability" (how well the area meets basic characteristics that make it suitable for wilderness recommendation), "availability" (the availability of a potential wilderness area for wilderness designation when considering other resource and land use potentials for the area) and "need" (how the potential area might contribute to the National Wilderness Preservation System at a regional scale in terms of ecological and social factors).

The Coconino National Forest identified 37 areas that met the initial inventory criteria, and evaluated those areas for wilderness capability. The ten areas that ranked high for capability were then evaluated on availability and need. More information can be found about these areas in the following documents posted to the Coconino National Forest's web site: [Draft Potential Wilderness Evaluation Inventory and Capability Results](#), the [Draft Potential Wilderness Area Evaluation Report](#).

### **What is the process for wilderness designation, and how long will it take?**

Only Congress can designate wilderness areas.

The potential wilderness evaluation process that the Coconino National Forest is completing is only the first step in the process for the Forest Service to recommend new wilderness areas to Congress. Once the evaluation is completed, the Forest develops alternatives considering different management scenarios for the areas based on public comment and analyzes the social, economic and ecological effects of the alternatives in a document called the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). There is a formal 90-day comment period once the Draft EIS is released. If the final alternative selected includes recommendations for wilderness, the recommendations are sent to the Chief of the Forest Service and then to the Secretary of Agriculture for final recommendation to Congress. The process of drafting and passing a wilderness bill can take an uncertain amount of time. Members of Congress and their staff work with their constituents throughout the legislative portion of the wilderness designation process. If Congress chooses, however, it can designate wilderness at any time and independent of the Forest Service.

**What IS and IS NOT allowed in wilderness?**

The use of motorized or mechanized equipment and vehicles, road construction and commercial activities are prohibited in wilderness, except under special provisions provided for by [the 1964 Wilderness Act](#). Examples of uses that are prohibited include mountain biking, off-highway vehicles, chainsaws, dams, etc. A [Congressional Research Service](#) Report created for Congress provides more information.

**How would wilderness designation affect current grazing on allotments that overlap with areas being considered for wilderness?**

Grazing is permitted in allotments that were being grazed prior to an area's designation as wilderness. The Forest Service uses the Congressional Grazing Guidelines which can be found in [Forest Service Manual 2320](#). These guidelines allow for the reasonable use of motorized and mechanized equipment to manage the range resource including improvements such as tanks and fences.

**Are there other options for promoting some of the same values as wilderness, but increase flexibility in what would be allowed in an area?**

Yes, these areas could be managed under plan direction that emphasizes or preserves some of their wilderness values, such as under the Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized category in the [Recreation Opportunities Spectrum](#).

**At what points can I participate in the process?**

You can participate in the wilderness evaluation process throughout the Forest Plan revision process. Comments are particularly useful during the development of the revised Plan and alternatives and during the 90-day comment period following the publication of the Draft EIS. You can get involved by joining our mailing list, providing comments, attending meetings, or talking to Forest Service and Congressional staff.

**Who can I contact if I have additional questions?**

For general Forest Plan revision inquiries, contact Ms. Yewah Lau at ph: (928) 527-3411 or email: [ylau@fs.fed.us](mailto:ylau@fs.fed.us). For wilderness-specific questions, contact Sara Dechter, Social and Economic lead, by phone at (928) 527-3413 or email: [sedechter@fs.fed.us](mailto:sedechter@fs.fed.us).