

**DECISION NOTICE AND FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
AND DESIGNATION ORDER
FOR DESIGNATION OF FIVE
RESEARCH NATURAL AREAS IN UTAH**

**DIXIE NATIONAL FOREST
Pine Valley and Escalante Ranger Districts
Washington and Garfield Counties, Utah**

**FISHLAKE NATIONAL FOREST
Richfield Ranger District
Sevier County, Utah**

**MANTI-LA SAL NATIONAL FOREST
Moab-Monticello Ranger District
San Juan County, Utah**

By virtue of the authority delegated to me by the Chief of the Forest Service, it is my decision to establish five Research Natural Areas (RNA's) listed in the enclosed table. These RNA's are located on the Dixie, Fishlake, and Manti-LaSal National Forests in Utah.

The recommendation for establishment of these five RNA's has resulted from studies made since Forest Plans containing them were finalized. The recommendations are the result of an analysis of the factors listed in 36 CFR 219.25 and the Forest Service Manual 4063.41. Copies of these studies are available at the respective Forest Supervisor's offices. The proposed RNA's were subsequently reexamined to determine the effects of formal establishment. This analysis is documented in an Environmental Assessment.

Based on the analysis in the environmental assessment, it is my decision to adopt Alternative #2, designate the areas as RNA's as described in the EA, for the Old Woman Cove area on the Fishlake National Forest, and the Hideout Mesa and Mill Creek Gorge areas on the Manti-LaSal National Forest.

For the two areas on the Dixie National Forest, Browse and Upper Sand Creek, it is my decision to adopt Alternative #2, with the following modifications: For Browse, the boundary description is modified to exclude the corridor 15 feet out from the edges of the road, or from the edges of vehicle pullouts, or any previously-disturbed areas that currently exist along the road, including a 30 foot extension around the gravel pit disturbed area near the crossing of Harmon and Mill Creeks. For Upper Sand Creek, the area will not be closed to domestic livestock grazing, nor will adjustments be made to Term Grazing Permits as a result of the designation. Range improvements shall not be placed within the area. Occasionally, livestock may stray into the area, as has been occurring, and will be managed by working with the

permittee under the terms of the grazing permit. Also, the Forest Service will honor all existing and lawful renewals of mineral or oil and gas leases, and this activity shall be managed as the priority land management feature for as long as the leases exist. The RNA's will be managed in compliance with all relevant laws, regulations, and Forest Service direction regarding RNA's, and in accordance with the management direction identified in the Forest Plans.

I have selected this course of action first and foremost to fill in some missing vegetation types in the RNA matrix for Utah, and provide replications for other vegetation types that are already in the matrix. These replications are necessary to prevent total loss of a vegetation type in the event a natural catastrophe befalls a given area. The purpose of establishing RNA's is to contribute to a national network of ecological areas for research, education, and the maintenance of biological diversity. I have also selected these areas because they have remained in a nearly pristine condition. Finally, selection of these areas for RNA designation will have no significant impacts on existing uses of the three National Forests as is disclosed on pages 8 through 17 of the EA.

Four alternatives were considered and described in detail in the EA. Alternative #1, no action, would not formally designate these RNA's. Instead, the areas would be managed according to the surrounding management area direction in the Forest Plans. Alternative #2, the proposed action, would formally designate the five RNA's and amend the Dixie, Fishlake and Manti-LaSal Forests' Plans. Alternative #3 would defer the decision on RNA's until the Forest Plans are revised. The proposed RNA's would be managed under the current Plans' direction which specifies the areas' relatively undisturbed conditions would be protected until a decision is made. Alternative #4 looks at alternate boundary locations for some of the RNA's to reduce the potential for conflicts with future uses of these areas.

The Dixie, Fishlake, and Manti-LaSal Forest Plans are hereby amended to change the status of the areas from their existing prescription to prescriptions for the management of RNA's. These are non-significant amendments to the Forest Plans (36 CFR 219.10(f). For the Browse area, this is a change from Prescriptions 4A (fish habitat emphasis) and 9A (riparian management) to 10A (Research Natural Areas). For the Upper Sand Creek area, this would add prescription 10A (Research Natural Areas) to prescription 8A (Wilderness). For the Old Woman Cove area, this is a change from prescription 6 (emphasis on grazing) to prescription 10A (manage for Research Natural Areas). For the Hideout Mesa area, this is a change from prescription RNG (emphasis on production of forage) to prescription RPI (emphasis on research, protection, and interpretation of lands). For the Mill Creek Gorge area, this is a change from prescription SPR (emphasis on semi-primitive recreation) to Prescription RPI (emphasis on research, protection, and interpretation of lands).

The Environmental Assessment prepared for the establishment of these RNA's was released for a 30-day public review period on July 2, 1998. Copies of the Environmental Assessment were mailed to interested and affected agencies, organizations, and individuals. Six letters were received in response to the Environmental Assessment. I carefully considered the comments with site-specific concerns about some of the proposed Research Natural Areas. I verified the field conditions with Forest and District personnel. These comments helped clarify some of the management situations and potential effects of formally establishing these five Research Natural Areas. The enclosed appendix with the response to the comments explains in more detail these effects and supports my reasons for formally establishing these Research Natural Areas as part of the national network.

I have determined through the Environmental Assessment that the proposed action is not a major Federal action which would significantly affect the quality of the human environment; therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement is not needed. This determination is based on the following factors:

A. Context:

Although this is an addition to the national system of Research Natural Areas, both short-term and long-term physical and biological effects are limited to the local area.

B. Intensity:

1. There are no known effects on public health and safety.
2. There are no known effects on historic or cultural resources, actual or eligible National Register or Historic Places sites, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.
3. Effects on the human environment were disclosed in the Environmental Assessment and are further described in the response to the comments received on the EA. These effects do not involve unique or unknown risks, and are not likely to be highly controversial.
4. The action does not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects.
5. There are no known cumulative effects of establishing the Research Natural Areas.
6. The proposed action does not adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its critical habitat.
7. The proposed action is consistent with Federal, State, and local laws and requirements for the protection of the environment.

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 217. Two copies of the Notice of Appeal must be in writing and submitted to:

USDA - Forest Service
Appeals Office, 3NW, NFS
P.O. Box 96090
Washington D.C. 20090-6090

The Notice of Appeal prepared pursuant to 36 CFR 217.9 (b) must be submitted within 45 days from the date of the legal notice of this decision which is


for JACK A. BLACKWELL
Regional Forester

11/20/98
Date