

17 Wilderness

Overview

During the plan revision process, the Forest Service must identify lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System and determine whether to recommend any areas for wilderness designation. Only Congress can designate areas as wilderness under the Wilderness Act of 1964; however, the Forest Service planning process plays an important role in which lands are considered. There are several opportunities to participate in the wilderness evaluation and decisionmaking process during forest plan revision.

Why It Matters

Wilderness areas are Federal lands that Congress specially designates to preserve their natural, undeveloped character. In 1964, Congress passed the Wilderness Act; this was followed by the Eastern Wilderness Act in 1975 and many other congressional acts designating additions to the National Wilderness Protection System. As of March 2016, there are 445 wilderness areas in the National Forest System. New wilderness areas require acts of Congress to be designated.

Wilderness areas are important for many reasons. They often provide scenic landscapes, high-quality water, and good habitat for many wildlife species such as elk and bear. For those who like to “get away from it all,” wilderness areas can be great places to go hiking, backpacking, and hunting.

When an area is designated “wilderness” by Congress, some kinds of recreation and management are not allowed unless Congress approves the activity in the statute that designates the specific area as wilderness. For example, use of motorized vehicles and bicycles is prohibited in wilderness areas. Mining (subject to valid existing rights), logging, and road building are also not permitted.

So, there are choices and trade-offs involved in deciding what areas, if any, the plan should recommend for congressional designation. The best decisions will be made with input from all people who care about their national forests—both wilderness and nonwilderness.



During a forest plan revision, **the Forest Service considers whether to recommend to Congress certain areas for wilderness designation.**



Wilderness Process

1

Inventory

- Engage the public
- Develop inventory of lands that should be evaluated for wilderness characteristics
- Conclude with a map of lands included in wilderness inventory and documentation of how the inventory was developed

2

Evaluation

- Evaluate all lands in the wilderness inventory for wilderness characteristics
- Provide opportunities for public participation during evaluation
- Conclude with a report, including maps, that describes the wilderness character of each area from the inventory

3

Analysis

- Identify lands that, based on evaluation process, are carried forward into one or more alternative plans. For lands not carried forward, document reason for excluding from continued analysis
- Create wilderness element for plan alternatives that will be considered during development and review of the draft environmental impact statement (DEIS)
- Document process in DEIS appendixes
- Provide opportunity for public participation as part of 90-day comment period

4

Recommendation

- Finalize wilderness recommendation in Record of Decision after objection process
- Continue public participation through the objection process

Process

During the assessment, the Forest Service will gather information about existing wilderness areas and opportunities and the need for additional wilderness. It may also begin to inventory lands that may be suitable for wilderness designation, though it is possible for the inventory to start later, even after the assessment phase. The Forest Service will provide opportunities for public involvement during each step of the process.

Step 1—Inventory

The wilderness inventory starts with existing information, such as roadless area locations and road conditions. Areas that can be included in the inventory typically:

- Are at least 5,000 acres,
- Do not have roads that are open for motor vehicles, and
- Do not have other “substantially noticeable” human impacts on the land.

Being included in the wilderness inventory does not mean that an area will necessarily be managed in any special way. It just means that the area’s wilderness qualities will be examined further in the planning process to determine whether the area will be considered for wilderness recommendation in the revised forest plan.

Step 2—Evaluation

Next, planners evaluate the wilderness character of each inventoried area. For example, does the area meet the description of wilderness found in the Wilderness Act, such as outstanding opportunities for solitude or places where people can enjoy primitive, unconfined types of recreation?

Step 3—Comment and Decision

After the evaluation, the Forest Service will present its findings, preliminary wilderness recommendations (if any) and analysis of those recommendations in a draft plan and environmental impact statement for public review and comment. The public will have at least 90 days to comment on the Forest Service’s proposal before it is finalized.

Step 4—Recommendation

If the forest plan recommends an area for wilderness, the area will be managed to protect its wilderness characteristics that made it suitable for wilderness designation. For areas that are not recommended for wilderness designation, the plan is not limited regarding how those lands can be managed and can provide other types of special designations such as backcountry recreation or scenic areas.



Possible Key Topics

- Review of existing wilderness areas and the opportunity and need for additional wilderness designations
- Determination of whether the inventory is reasonably thorough and inclusive
- Consideration of when areas with roads are included in the inventory
- Determination of whether certain impacts on the land are “substantially noticeable”
- Limitations on uses and management of an area recommended for wilderness designation to protect its wilderness characteristics
- Consideration of public concerns about allowing, restricting, or prohibiting uses like motorized recreation in areas that may be recommended for wilderness
- Consideration of other types of designations (besides wilderness)
- Management of recreational opportunities
- Consideration of fire suppression strategies and tactics in wilderness

For More Information

General information about wilderness: <http://www.wilderness.net>