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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Rocky Mountain Region / Black Hills National Forest

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# Black Hills National Forest

## Final Forest Assessment: Potential Wilderness Inventory Process Summary



Existing Black Elk Wilderness. U.S. Forest Service photo.

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## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

### **What is an Assessment Report?**

The Black Hills National Forest is managed by the United States Forest Service (USFS), an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The mission of the USFS is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. The National Forest Management Act requires all national forests to develop a land and resource management plan (forest plan) in order to guide management actions and decisions. The current forest plan for the Black Hills National Forest was approved in 1997. Substantial plan amendments were last approved in March 2006; relatively minor amendments occurred through 2018. The revision process includes identifying and evaluating lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS) and determining whether to recommend to the Chief of the USFS any such lands for wilderness designation. A description of this process can be found in the 2012 USFS Planning Rule and Chapter 70 of the USFS Land Management Planning Handbook 1909.12. This process includes the following four steps:

1. Identify and inventory all lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the NWPS.
2. Evaluate the wilderness characteristics of each area based on a given set of criteria.
3. The Forest Supervisor will determine which areas to further analyze in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process.
4. The Forest Supervisor will decide which areas, if any, to recommend for inclusion in the NWPS.

Lands evaluated and analyzed through this process and the resulting NEPA analysis are only preliminary administrative recommendations; Congress has reserved the authority to make final decisions on wilderness designation.

### **Resource Overview**

This document summarizes the first step in the process outlined above for potential wilderness in the Black Hills National Forest.

## **Chapter 2. Resource Assessment**

### **Inventory of Lands already included in the National Wilderness Preservation System**

The Black Hills National Forest is home to one congressionally designated wilderness area, the Black Elk Wilderness, covering 15,354 acres, or 1.1% of the Forest. The Black Elk Wilderness was first established as part of the Norbeck Wildlife Preserve in 1920, was designated by Congress in 1980 through the NWPS and is managed by the Hell Canyon Ranger District.

The Black Elk Wilderness is named after an Oglala Lakota spiritual leader and is sacred to many American Indians. Precambrian rock formations and thick ponderosa pine forests create ample climbing and hiking opportunities, making it a very popular recreation area for locals and tourists. Prominent landmarks within the wilderness include the highest point in the U.S. east of the Rocky Mountains, Black Elk Peak (7,244 feet).

## Inventory of Lands that may be Suitable for Inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System

The Black Hills National Forest interdisciplinary team (see Appendix A for a list of members) began identifying and inventorying lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the NWPS using the size, adjacency, and road improvements criteria outlined in the Forest Service Handbook (FSH). See FSH 1909.12 Chapter 70, 71.21 and 71.22a.

### Inventory Process and Criteria

#### 1. Initial screening

- Private in-holdings were removed from National Forest System (NFS) lands.
- Forest Service roads (USDA Forest Service 2021) maintenance level 2 through 5 were buffered 50 feet (100-foot corridor) and removed. See FSH 1909.12 Road Maintenance Definitions, Chapter 70.2.
- Pipelines, overhead powerlines, and underground powerlines (USDA Forest Service 2021) were buffered 50 feet (100-foot corridor) and excluded from the inventory areas.
- Areas of mineral rights (USDA Forest Service 2021) that suggest substantially noticeable modifications in the area were removed.
- Areas of past timber harvest were excluded from the inventory areas. (USDA Forest Service 2021).

2. Acreages of areas were then calculated, and the following size classes were maintained for further consideration:

- An area greater than 5,000 acres.
- An area adjacent to existing wilderness regardless of size.
- A standalone area in unimpaired condition (not adjacent to existing wilderness) that is less than 5,000 acres and can be effectively managed and preserved as a separate unit of NWPS.

Following the initial screening steps, all unauthorized/user-created routes were removed from the inventory because they are not part of the official road system. Those routes will be considered in the evaluation phase as part of the apparent naturalness and degree to which the area may be managed to preserve its wilderness characteristics.

Finally, non-wilderness activities or uses adjacent to the inventory area do not disqualify an inventoried area from evaluation. Therefore, the inventory includes areas adjacent to development and/or activities that impact opportunities for solitude.

## Inventory Results

The resulting areas and acres are summarized in table 1. The overall results include the following:

- One stand-alone area, Inyan Kara, is less than 5,000 acres. Inyan Kara was included due to its isolation, remoteness, and inaccessibility (USDA Forest Service 2007).
- Other areas less than 5,000 acres in size were included because they are adjacent to Black Elk Wilderness.
- Forest-wide, 38,353 acres are included in the final wilderness inventory map.

**Table 1. Wilderness inventory results**

<b>Inventory Polygon</b>	<b>Ranger District</b>	<b>Reason</b>		<b>Acres</b>	<b>Comment</b>
01	Bearlodge	Larger than 5K acres		5,627.23	
02	Bearlodge	Larger than 5K acres		12,388.81	Sand Creek IRA
03	Northern Hills	Larger than 5K acres		5,212.33	Beaver Park IRA
04	Hell Canyon	Wilderness Adjacent		1,295.02	
05	Hell Canyon	Wilderness Adjacent		184.45	
06	Hell Canyon	Wilderness Adjacent		94.81	
07	Hell Canyon	Wilderness Adjacent		7.18	
08	Hell Canyon	Wilderness Adjacent		1,656.02	
09	Hell Canyon	Wilderness Adjacent		14.11	
10	Hell Canyon	Larger than 5K acres		5,142.36	
11	Hell Canyon	Larger than 5K acres		5,421.46	
12	Bearlodge	Smaller than 5K acres		1,308.74	Inyan Kara IRA

[Acronyms: IRA, inventoried roadless area]

Figure 1 displays the inventory results, along with the existing Black Elk Wilderness, and roadless areas on the Black Hills National Forest (a larger version of Figure 1 is available in Appendix C). Inventoried roadless areas (IRAs) are defined as “any area, without the presence of a classified road, of a size and configuration sufficient to protect the inherent characteristics associated with its roadless condition” (36 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] 219.36). The Black Hills National Forest has only one designated wilderness area – the Black Elk Wilderness. There are currently approximately 30,000 acres of IRAs within the Black Hills National Forest. Approximately 38,353 acres have been identified as areas that may be suitable for inclusion in the NWPS (table 1).

Areas shown on figure 1 and Table 1 meet the first criteria regarding size and lack of roads. Inclusion does not imply designation, does not convey or require a particular kind of management, and inclusion or removal of any of these lands is open to discussion.

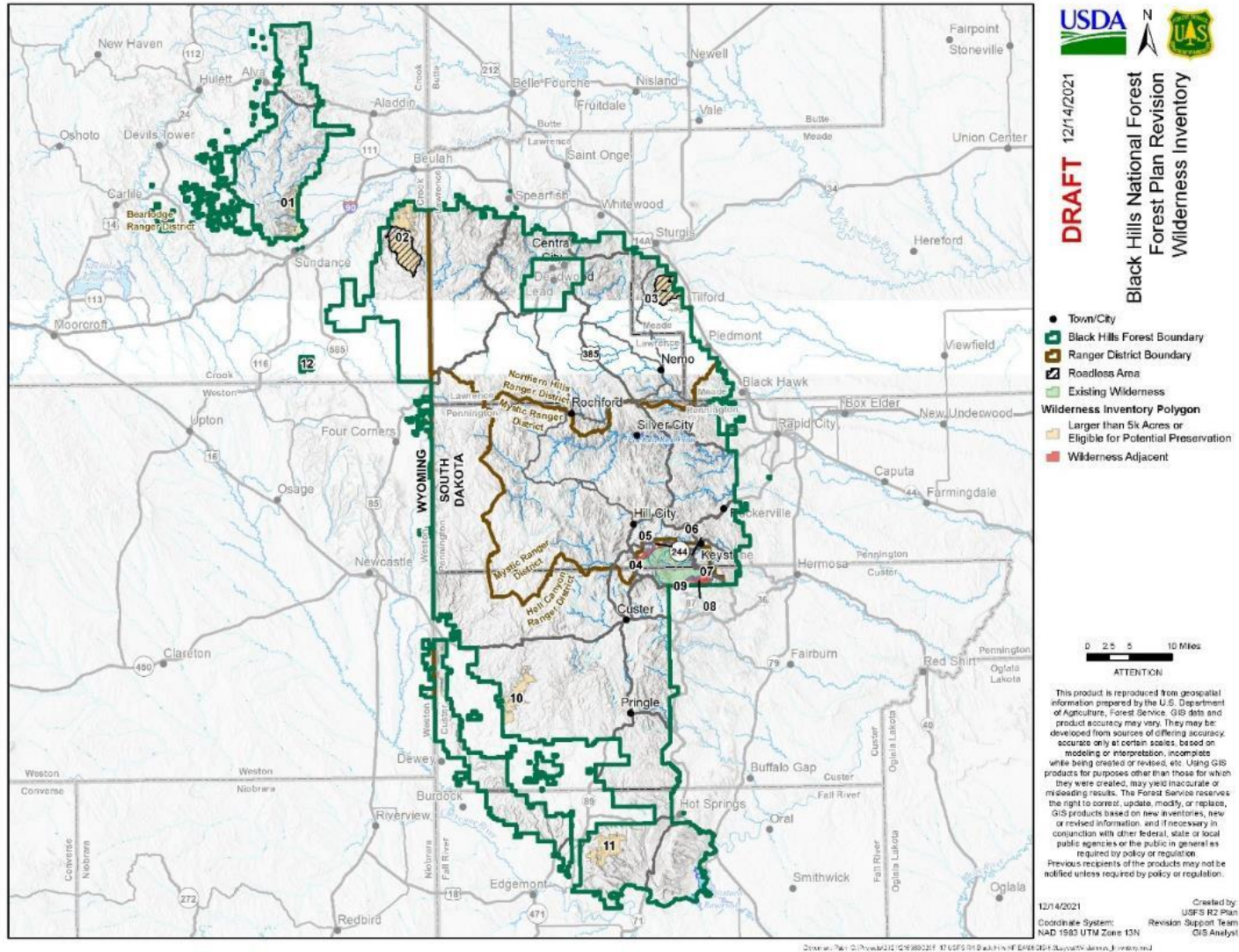


Figure 1. Wilderness inventory results

## **Chapter 3. Next Steps**

### **Evaluation**

The next step in the wilderness recommendation process is to evaluate each area on the inventory map for wilderness characteristics. Evaluation of wilderness characteristics considers five criteria set forth in the Wilderness Act of 1964 and required in the Forest Service Handbook final directives (FSH 1909.12, Chapter 70, Section 72.1). A summary of these five criteria is as follows:

- Evaluate the degree to which the area generally appears to be affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprints of man's work substantially unnoticeable (apparent naturalness).
- Evaluate the degree to which the area has outstanding opportunities for solitude or for a primitive and unconfined type of recreation. The area does not have to possess outstanding opportunities for both elements, nor does it need to have outstanding opportunities on every acre.
- Evaluate how an area of less than 5,000 acres is of sufficient size to make its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition practicable.
- Evaluate the degree to which an area may contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value. These values are not required to be present in an area, but their presence should be identified and evaluated where they exist.
- Evaluate the degree to which the area may be managed to preserve its wilderness characteristics.

Over the next several months, each area of the inventory will be evaluated for these criteria based on direction from the FSH 1909.12 Chapter 70. Supporting information that is identified during the evaluation phase will be used to evaluate and assess the area as a whole.

### **Analysis and Recommendation**

Following the evaluation phase, the Forest Supervisor will decide, based on evaluation and public input, which areas, or portions thereof, will be considered for wilderness designation in the draft forest plan and alternatives. Comments will help inform the forest plan revision and draft environmental impact statement.

Once the forest plan is finalized, the final environmental impact statement is released, and a record of decision is signed, the Forest Supervisor for the Black Hills National Forest may recommend suitable lands for NWPS designation to the Chief of the USFS. Such recommendation may then be forwarded to the Secretary of Agriculture, and ultimately to Congress, for their consideration and possible designation. Congress has reserved the authority to make final decisions on wilderness designation.

## References Cited

- USDA Forest Service. 2007. Black Hills National Forest Forest-wide Travel Analysis Report 2007  
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Regional Office GIS specialist.
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Interdisciplinary team, November 16, 2021.

## Appendix A. Black Hills National Forest Interdisciplinary Team

**Table 2. Black Hills National Forest interdisciplinary team**

Name	Affiliation and Title
Louie Conroy	Project Manager
Don Yasuda	Assistant Project Manager
Sara Erickson	Recreation Planner
Natalie Heberling	Region 2 Planning Team, GIS
Brian Taylor	GIS

## Appendix B. Map

The following map is provided as a separate PDF document on the forest plan revision [assessment webpage](#) for the Black Hills National Forest.

Map 1. Wilderness inventory map