

# Vernal Wilderness Characteristics

## **Land Use Planning and Wilderness Characteristics**

Due to recent judicial decisions and internal review of Resource Management Plan (RMP) revision efforts, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is addressing how non-wilderness study area (WSA) lands with wilderness characteristics are considered during the land use planning process. A Supplemental Draft Resource Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (DRMP/EIS) for the Vernal Field Office RMP has been prepared to address these issues. The original Vernal Field Office DRMP/EIS, prepared to guide management of these lands, was released for public review in January 2005.

This approach to land use planning will ensure that adequate consideration is given to wilderness characteristics during the RMP process by including at least one alternative that is analyzed for managing these needs. This alternative (Alternative E) outlines protective management prescriptions that may be used to manage non-WSA lands with wilderness characteristics. The goal of this project is to ensure that adequate consideration is given to wilderness characteristics, an adequate range of alternatives is considered for these lands, and an adequate analysis is prepared from which to base future land use decisions. This analysis will be used in future oil and gas leasing decisions.

## **Wilderness Study Area Determinations**

Under this revised approach, the BLM will not establish new WSAs. The BLM does not have legal authority to take this type of action. The BLM may, however, inventory lands for wilderness characteristics and consider management to maintain this resource throughout the land use planning process. This decision will strengthen BLM's land use planning process and increase the range of alternatives used to make sound planning decisions.

## **Scope of the Project**

The Vernal Field Office (VFO) planning area encompasses public lands managed by the BLM in Daggett, Duchesne, Uintah, as well as a portion of Grand Counties, Utah. This includes approximately 1.7 million acres of BLM-administered surface lands and 2.5 million acres of federal mineral estate underlying federal, state, and private lands. The VFO also has oversight responsibilities of mineral development over an additional 1.3 million acres of National Forest System lands.

There are multiple areas within the VFO (totaling 277,596 acres in 25 areas), outside of existing WSAs, which have wilderness characteristics. The BLM's land use planning handbook (Manual Handbook H-1601-1) provides guidance for consideration of non-WSA lands with wilderness characteristics in land use planning. The handbook provides that the BLM may consider these lands and resource values in planning, and prescribe measures to manage for their wilderness characteristics. These characteristics include the appearance of naturalness, outstanding opportunities for solitude, and outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation.

