

Snake River Islands Wilderness Study Area

1. The Study Area -- 770 acres

The Snake River Islands WSA (ID-34-2) is comprised of 39 separate islands located within a 25-mile segment of Idaho's South Fork of the Snake River in Bonneville County between Swan Valley and Heise, Idaho. The WSA includes 770 acres of public land. Ownership of the adjacent river banks is a mixed pattern of private, State of Idaho and U.S. Forest Service (see Table 1). Twenty-five of the islands are withdrawn for power site and reclamation projects by the Bureau of Reclamation.

The Snake River Islands are characterized by dense riparian vegetation. An overstory of middle-aged cottonwoods occurs on the larger islands with an understory of forbs, grasses, scattered shrubs and an occasional park-like opening. Smaller islands that do not support cottonwood trees are covered with willows, Russian olive, alder and dogwood. The surrounding river landscape varies within the 25-mile corridor and influences the character of the islands. The segment from Swan Valley to Conant Valley is characterized as a generally open flood plain and pastoral setting. From Conant Valley, the river flows through a rugged, deep gorge comprising the most scenic stretch of the South Fork. Beyond the canyon to Heise, the river enters a flat alluvial flood plain flanked by farmland.

The WSA was studied under Section 603 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) and was included in the Medicine Lodge Resource Management Plan and Medicine Lodge Wilderness Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) filed in December 1987. Three alternatives were analyzed in the FEIS for the Snake River Islands WSA: the proposed action (no wilderness) alternative, which is the recommendation of this report; an all wilderness alternative (770 acres); and a partial wilderness alternative (155 acres - 12 islands).

2. Recommendation and Rationale

**0 acres recommended for
wilderness**

**770 acres recommended for
nonwilderness**

The recommendation for the Snake River Islands WSA is to designate the area as nonwilderness and to release all 39 islands (770 acres) for uses other than wilderness (see the Snake River Islands Proposal maps 1-6). The environmentally preferable alternative is the all wilderness alternative. It would cause the least change from the natural environment over the long term. The recommendation would use all practical means to avoid or minimize adverse environmental impacts. All 39 islands are recommended as nonsuitable for wilderness designation because the islands are extremely small and use adjacent to the islands is heavy and increasing. The islands cannot easily be managed as wilderness and wilderness values are impaired by unnatural water flow regulation, motorboat traffic, recreation use and other outside influences.

A variety of conditions adversely affect BLM's ability to manage the islands as wilderness:

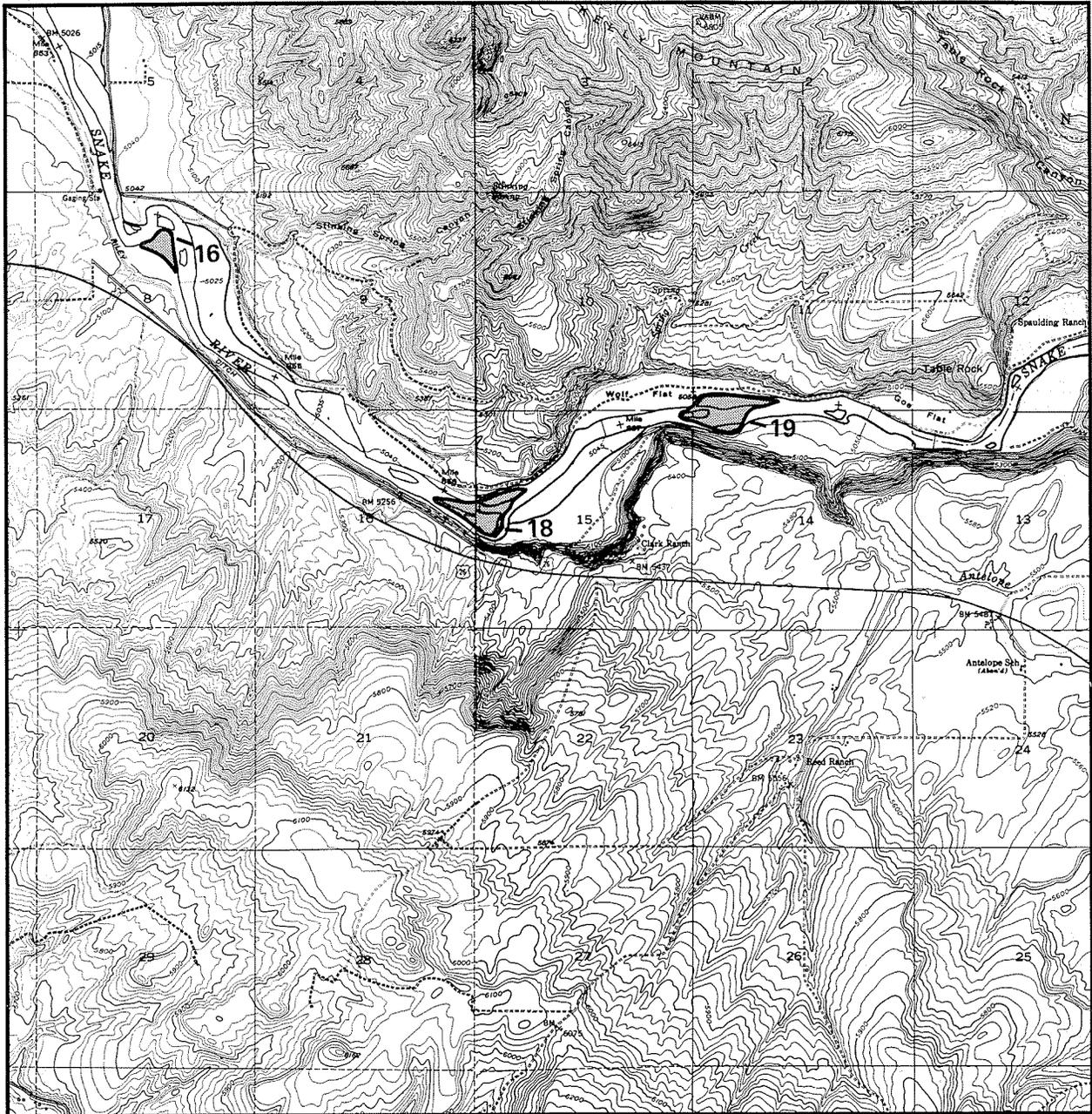
Water levels in the South Fork are regulated by the Bureau of Reclamation at Palisades Dam and fluctuate significantly depending on irrigation demands or needs projected for storage. These fluctuations, both extremely high flows and low flows, have changed the islands' size, configuration and vegetative cover within the past few years. River channels that once separated several islands from the mainland no longer carry flows below 10,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) or are dry except during the highest flows (15,000-20,000 cfs). Island size and configuration have been altered by the erosive action of the water. In the spring of 1986, high flows (26,000 cfs) stripped a number of the islands in the upper river segment of vegetation and left gravel bars. BLM has no control over water releases from the dam and, therefore, no control on whether an island will remain an island over the long term. Wilderness boundary identification and management would be impossible over the long term.

The opportunity to experience solitude and primitive recreation and a visitor's perception of naturalness on the majority of the islands is limited because of outside influences that cannot be controlled. Use of motorboats on the river is allowed and BLM has no control over the type of boat used since it is state-controlled water. Motorboat traffic is extensive, particularly during the summer fishing season. Avoiding the sights and sounds from this traffic on the small islands is nearly impossible. Twenty-seven of the islands have other adjacent and nearby influences which degrade wilderness values. These include highway traffic, recreational and landowner traffic along a paralleling river road, farm-related machinery and structures, and cattle grazing. The remaining 11 islands within the scenic canyon portion of the river are influenced by camping activities and a canyon rim trail that has motorcycle, horse and hiking traffic which can be seen and heard from the islands. Unwanted grazing impacts naturalness when livestock on nearby river allotments cross shallow or nonexistent channels onto the islands. Livestock also interfere with opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation. All of these influences are impossible or difficult for BLM to control and manage because of the adjacent mixed ownership of private, state and national forest lands.

BLM recognizes that the Snake River Islands WSA possesses the required basic wilderness characteristics and has certain natural values that are and will be protected but difficulties in wilderness management and the trade-offs with other resource uses outweigh the benefits of wilderness designation.

The natural values and resource uses that will be protected include bald eagle nesting and wintering areas, big game wintering grounds and blue ribbon cutthroat trout fisheries, important riparian and ecosystem relationships and highly valued scenic resources. These values will be protected through special designations and management objectives outlined in the Medicine Lodge Resource Management Plan. These designations include an Area of Critical Environmental Concern and Special Recreation Management Area. The management objectives of these designations will focus on protecting natural and wildlife values and resources while providing and accommodating motorized and nonmotorized recreation uses and needs.

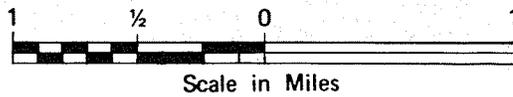
The Medicine Lodge RMP decision has placed protective limitations on development of the South Fork of the Snake River that includes all of the islands in the Snake River Islands WSA. These limitations are no surface occupancy for oil and gas and geothermal resources, withdrawal of locatable minerals from mining claim location and closure to sand and gravel extraction.



T.
3
N.

R. 41 E.

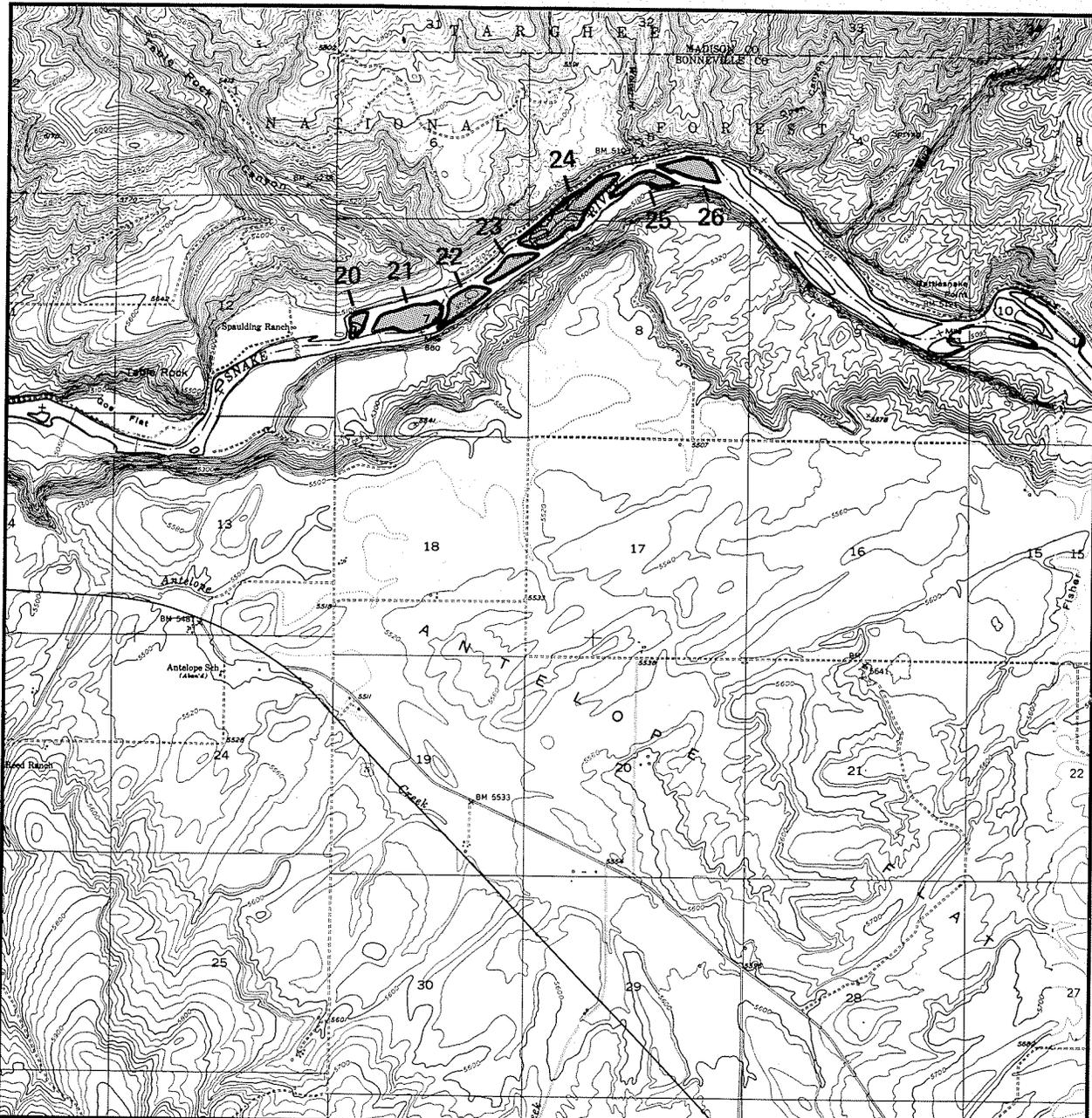
- | | | | |
|---|---|---|--------------|
|  | RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |  | SPLIT ESTATE |
|  | RECOMMENDED FOR NONWILDERNESS |  | STATE |
|  | LAND OUTSIDE WSA RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |  | PRIVATE |



ID-34-2
 SNAKE RIVER ISLANDS
 PROPOSAL

MAP 1

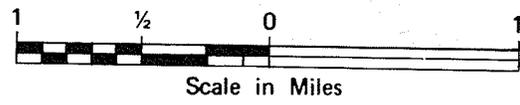
AUGUST 1988



T. 3 N.

R. 41 E. | R. 42 E.

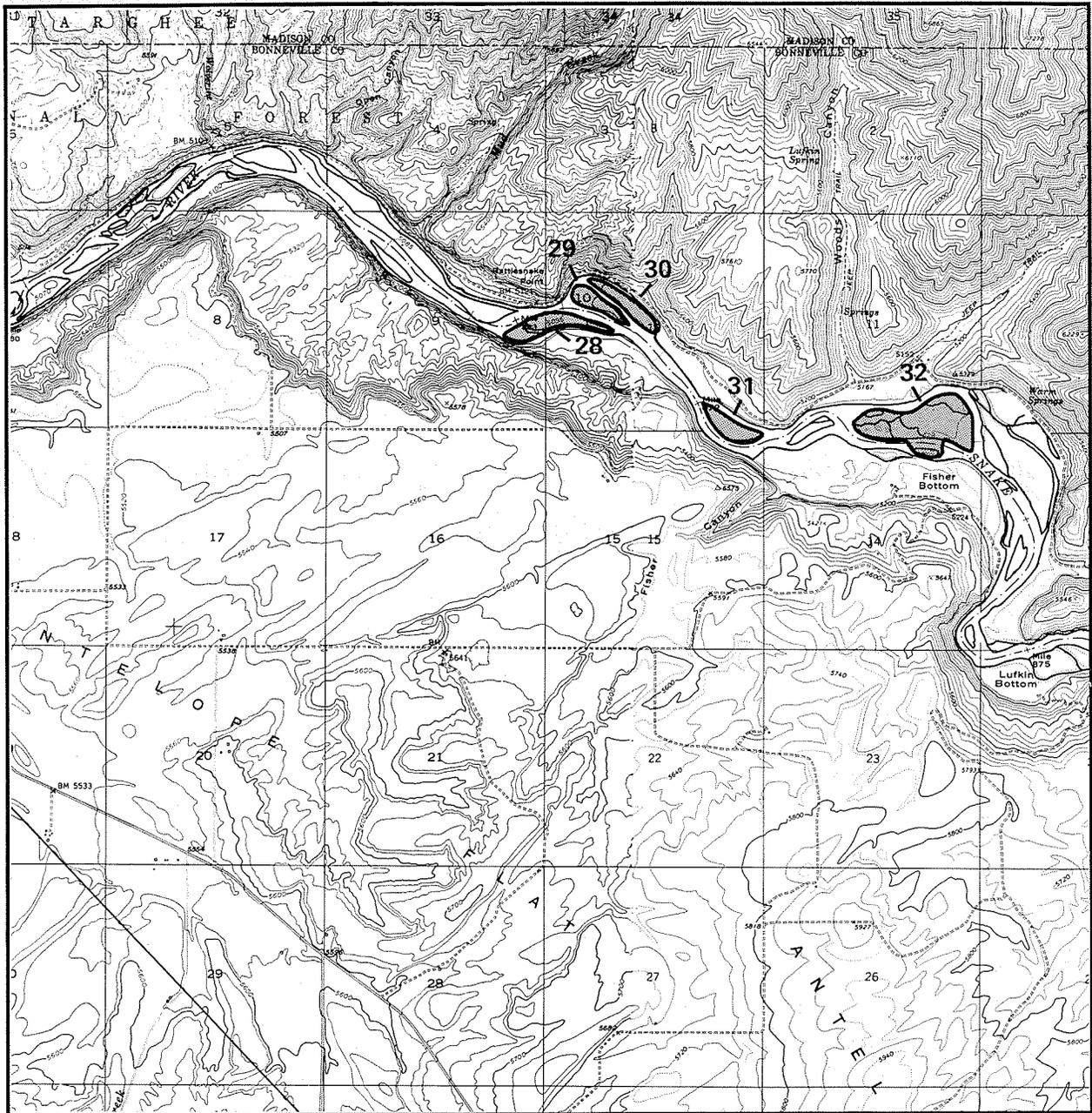
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|---|---|---|--------------|
|  | RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |  | SPLIT ESTATE |
|  | RECOMMENDED FOR NONWILDERNESS |  | STATE |
|  | LAND OUTSIDE WSA RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |  | PRIVATE |



ID-34-2
SNAKE RIVER ISLANDS
PROPOSAL

MAP 2

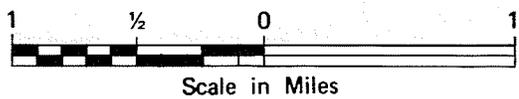
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T. 3 N.

R.42 E.

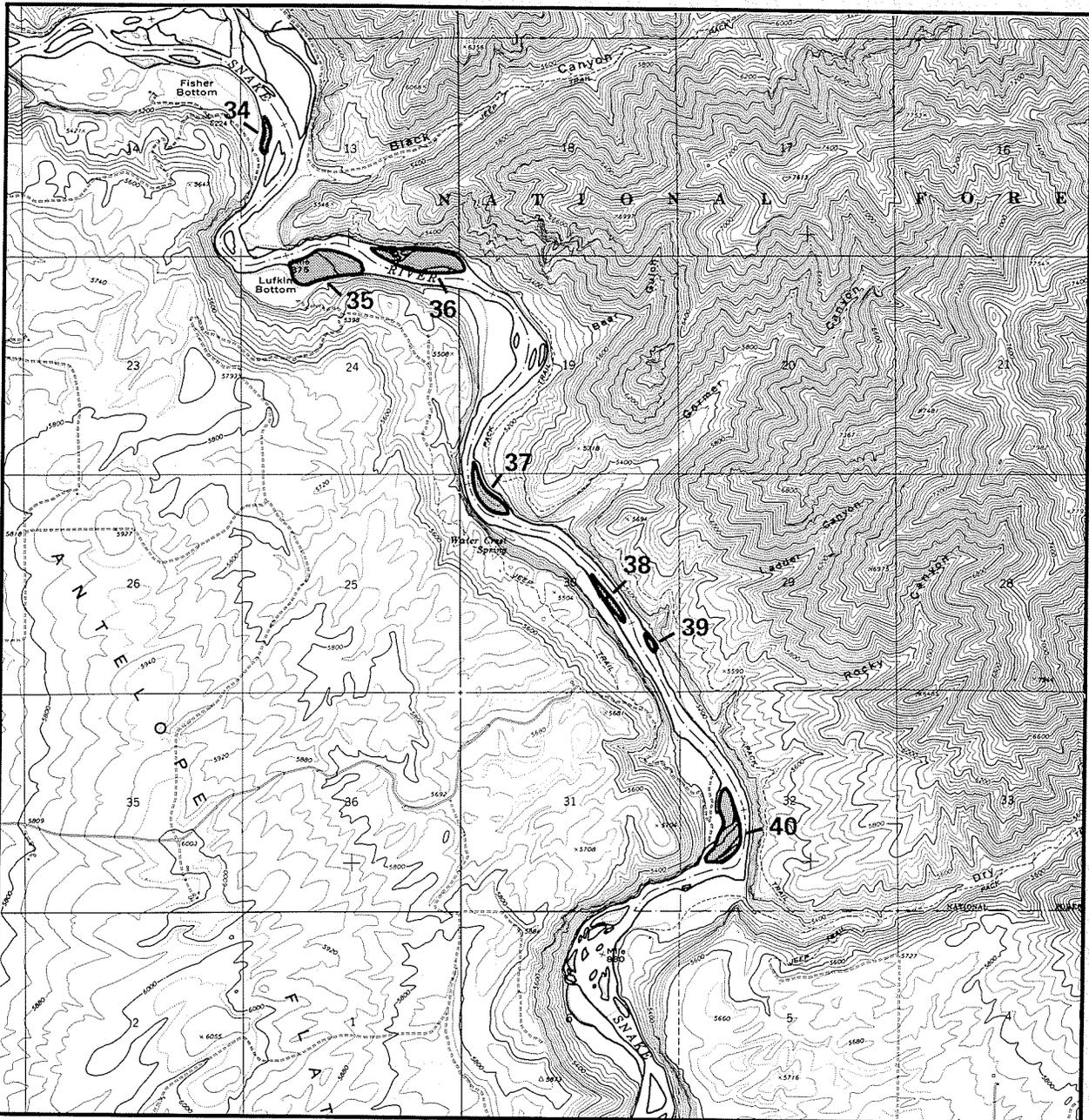
- | | | | |
|---|---|---|--------------|
|  | RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |  | SPLIT ESTATE |
|  | RECOMMENDED FOR NONWILDERNESS |  | STATE |
|  | LAND OUTSIDE WSA RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |  | PRIVATE |



ID-34-2
SNAKE RIVER ISLANDS
PROPOSAL

MAP 3

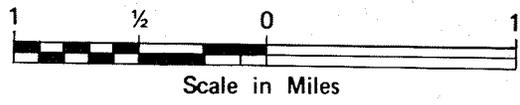
AUGUST 1988



T. 3 N.
T. 2 N.

R. 42 E. | R. 43 E.

- | | | | |
|---|---|---|--------------|
|  | RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |  | SPLIT ESTATE |
|  | RECOMMENDED FOR NONWILDERNESS |  | STATE |
|  | LAND OUTSIDE WSA RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |  | PRIVATE |



ID-34-2
SNAKE RIVER ISLANDS
PROPOSAL

MAP 4

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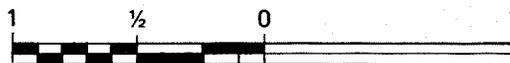


T. 3 N.

T. 2 N.

R. 42 E. | R. 43 E.

- | | | | |
|---|---|---|--------------|
|  | RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |  | SPLIT ESTATE |
|  | RECOMMENDED FOR NONWILDERNESS |  | STATE |
|  | LAND OUTSIDE WSA RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |  | PRIVATE |

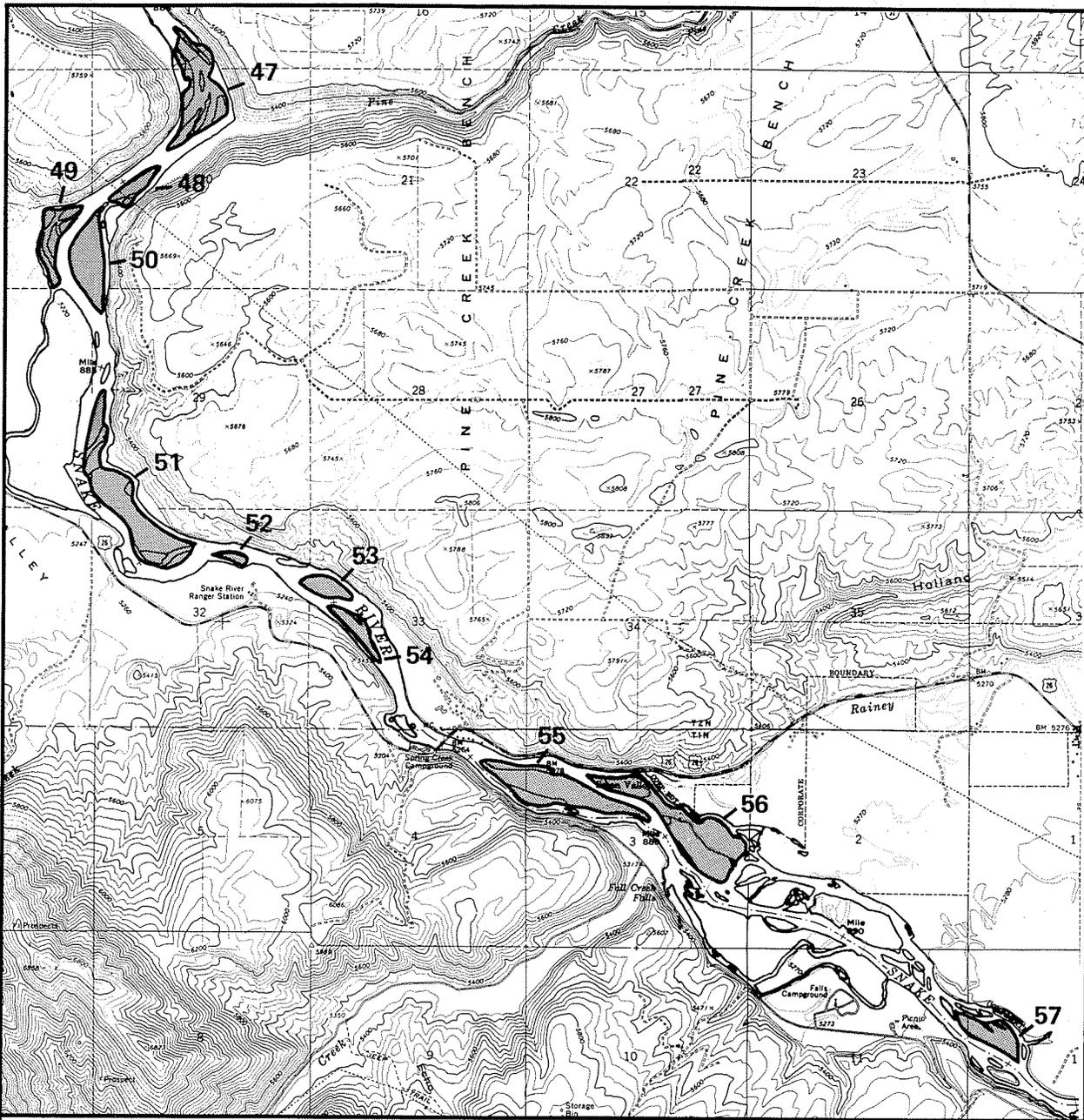


Scale in Miles

ID-34-2
SNAKE RIVER ISLANDS
PROPOSAL

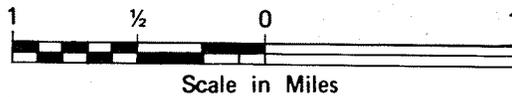
MAP 5

AUGUST 1988



R. 43 E.

- | | | | |
|---|---|---|--------------|
|  | RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |  | SPLIT ESTATE |
|  | RECOMMENDED FOR NONWILDERNESS |  | STATE |
|  | LAND OUTSIDE WSA RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |  | PRIVATE |



ID-34-2
SNAKE RIVER ISLANDS
PROPOSAL

MAP 6

AUGUST 1988

T. 2 N.
T. 1 N.

**Table 1 -- Land Status and Acreage Summary of the Study Area
SNAKE RIVER ISLANDS WSA**

Within Wilderness Study Area

| | |
|---------------------------------|---------|
| BLM (surface and subsurface) | 770 |
| Split Estate (BLM surface only) | 0 |
| Inholdings (state, private) | 0 |
| Total | 770 |

Within the Recommended Wilderness Boundary

| | |
|--|-------|
| BLM (within WSA) | 0 |
| BLM (outside WSA) | 0 |
| Split Estate (within WSA) | 0 |
| Split Estate (outside WSA) | 0 |
| Total BLM Land Recommended for Wilderness | 0 |
| Inholdings (state, private) | 0 |
| State land (outside WSA) | 0 |

Within the Area Not Recommended for Wilderness

| | |
|--|---------|
| BLM | 770 |
| Split Estate | 0 |
| Total BLM Land Not Recommended for Wilderness | 770 |
| Inholdings (state, private) | 0 |

3. Criteria Considered in Developing the Wilderness Recommendations

Wilderness Characteristics

A. Naturalness

The islands are essentially natural with some human imprints and influences. Impacts on the natural character of the Snake River Islands WSA islands are livestock grazing, litter and fire rings left by recreationists and nearby human activity and development. Grazing has reduced some thick island vegetation, creating open spaces more suitable for camping and spring waterfowl nesting. Litter and fire rings are found on the larger islands where camping is possible. Off-site influences appear the most dominant on islands 48-57 where Highway 26 is nearest the river and traffic can be seen clearly and heard from the islands. The use of automobiles for rip-rap is of some significance, particularly on island 54 where over 30 junk cars line the river bank. From islands 16-35, a gravel road parallels the river and is frequently used by recreationists and private landowners. A motorcycle, horse and hiking trail follows the canyon rim above islands 36-47. These off-site impacts degrade a visitor's perception of naturalness. Controlled water flows from Palisades Dam have caused unnatural erosive influences on the islands. High water levels to support downstream irrigation needs have cut new banks and channels which have changed the size and configuration of the islands. Channel flow in some instances has changed enough to reconnect some of the islands with the mainland.

B. Solitude

Opportunities for solitude vary and are affected by the size and vegetative cover of a particular island, seasonal recreation use and proximity to outside influences. On 15 of the 39 islands, a combination of vegetative screening and relatively large size contributes to opportunities for solitude. The remaining 24 islands can provide some opportunities for solitude but, because of their small size and thinner vegetative screening, visitors cannot avoid contact with others or outside influences. The major outside influences include Highway 26 and nearby developments, vehicle traffic on the gravel road between islands 16 and 35 and the presence of motorboats throughout the entire river segment, particularly during the summer fishing season when recreation use peaks.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

Opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation are numerous and of high quality but are influenced by motorboats, motor vehicle traffic on roads that parallel the river and farm-related activities. Fishing from and around the islands is the most popular activity and is directly related to the excellent cutthroat trout fishery in the South Fork. The river channel along the islands offers challenge for boaters to test their skills on flat, swift water. Primitive camping is available on several of the larger islands where there are grassy openings in the thick vegetation. The abundance and diversity of wildlife on the islands offer good deer and waterfowl hunting and excellent chances to observe and photograph several wildlife species, particularly bald and golden eagles. All of these recreation values are enhanced by the spectacular scenery found along the river corridor. However, the adjacent and nearby presence of motorboats, motor vehicle traffic and farm machinery degrades primitive recreation opportunities.

D. Special Features

The most important supplementary value of the Snake River Islands WSA is wildlife habitat. The islands provide bald eagle nesting and roosting sites and hunting areas for other raptors. Elk depend on the islands for forage in the winter while deer and moose use them year round. The islands are within an area evaluated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as the highest ranked ecosystem in Idaho. The ecosystem contains the most extensive and highest quality cottonwood-riparian forest in the state.

Diversity in the National Wilderness Preservation System

A. Assessing the Diversity of Natural Systems and Features as Represented by Ecosystems

Wilderness designation of the Snake River Islands WSA would add an ecosystem not presently represented in Idaho or in the National Wilderness Preservation System. This ecosystem is represented by 18 designated areas with 1,349,971 acres. There are four other BLM areas in the state under study with this ecosystem. This information is summarized in Table 2.

The islands are within an area evaluated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as the highest ranked ecosystem in Idaho. The ecosystem contains the most extensive and highest quality cottonwood-riparian forest in the state. This ecosystem is very limited in Idaho, covering less than 0.2 percent of the state, and is not represented in the wilderness system. Potential representation exists only in the Snake River Islands WSA.

TABLE 2
Ecosystem Representation

| Bailey-Kuchler Classification | <u>NWPS Areas</u> | | <u>Other BLM Studies</u> | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|-----------|--------------------------|---------|
| | areas | acres | areas | acres |
| Rocky Mountain Forest Province | | | | |
| | <u>NATIONWIDE</u> | | | |
| Douglas-Fir Forest Ecosystem | 18 | 1,349,971 | 4 | 26,152 |
| | <u>IDAHO</u> | | | |
| Douglas-Fir Forest Ecosystem | 0 | 0 | 19 | 173,228 |

**B. Expanding the Opportunities for Solitude or Primitive Recreation
Within a Day's Driving Time (Five Hours) of Major Population Centers**

The Snake River Islands WSA is within a five-hour drive of two major population centers. Table 3 summarizes the number and acreage of designated areas and other BLM study areas within a five-hour drive of the population centers.

Table 3

**Wilderness Opportunities for Residents
of Major Population Centers**

| Population Centers | <u>NWPS Areas</u> | | <u>Other BLM Studies</u> | |
|---|-------------------|-----------|--------------------------|-----------|
| | areas | acres | areas | acres |
| Boise, Idaho/Salt Lake City, Utah ¹ | 16 | 4,741,570 | 141 | 5,374,250 |

¹Salt Lake City, Utah, and vicinity includes other cities of Provo, Orem and Ogden, Utah.

C. Balancing the Geographic Distribution of Wilderness Areas

The Snake River Islands WSA would contribute to balancing the geographic distribution of areas within the National Wilderness Preservation System by adding an area in southeastern Idaho. In the region surrounding Idaho, the existing wilderness areas are concentrated in the Sierra Nevadas in California; the Cascade Mountain Range in Oregon and Washington; and in the Rocky Mountains of Idaho, Montana, Colorado and Wyoming. There are a few wilderness areas in Nevada, Utah, southeastern Oregon and southern Idaho.

Manageability

The Snake River Islands WSA cannot be managed as wilderness. Since the South Fork of the Snake River is dammed and regulated by the Bureau of Reclamation, BLM has no control over water levels. The variance in water flow has eroded some of the once tree-covered WSA islands to gravel bars. New islands have formed and islands that did not qualify for WSA status are now established and vegetated. At water levels below 10,000 cfs, many channels are dry, causing several WSA islands to become part of the river bank land and can no longer be classified as islands. Boundary identification would be difficult and ever-changing.

BLM has no control of outside influences on wilderness values because of the adjacent mixed ownership of private, state and national forest lands. The opportunity to experience solitude and primitive recreation and a visitor's perception of naturalness on the majority of the islands is limited because of off-site influences. Use of motor boats on the river is allowed on the water since it is state-owned. Motorboat traffic is extensive, particularly during the summer fishing season. Avoiding the sights and sounds from this traffic on the small islands is nearly impossible. Twenty-seven of the islands have other adjacent and nearby influences which degrade wilderness values. These include highway traffic, recreational and landowner traffic along a paralleling river road, farm-related machinery and structures and cattle grazing. The remaining 11 islands within the scenic canyon portion of the river are influenced by camping activities and a canyon rim trail that has motorcycle, horse and hiking traffic which can be seen and heard from the islands. Unwanted grazing impacts naturalness when livestock on nearby river allotments cross shallow or nonexistent channels onto the islands. Livestock also interfere with opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation.

Energy and Minerals Resource Values

A Geology, Energy and Mineral (GEM) assessment report was prepared for the Snake River Islands WSA in 1983 and 1984 (Geoexplorers International, Inc., 1983-84). Conclusions from the report are as follows:

No active unpatented or patented mining claims exist within the WSA. Most of island units 2 and 3 are covered by oil and gas leases. The potential for energy and mineral resources in the Snake River Islands WSA is rated moderate for oil and gas, low to moderate for geothermal, low for locatables and moderate to high for sand and gravel.

Impacts on Resources

The following comparative impact table summarizes the effects on pertinent resources for all the alternatives considered including designation or nondesignation of the entire area as wilderness.

Table 4
Comparative Summary of the Impacts by Alternative
WSA ID-34-2 (SNAKE RIVER ISLANDS)

| ISSUE TOPICS | PROPOSED ACTION (NO WILDERNESS/NO ACTION) | ALL WILDERNESS ALTERNATIVE | PARTIAL WILDERNESS ALTERNATIVE |
|---|---|--|--|
| Impacts on Wilderness Values | Over the short term, naturalness and primitive recreation would be maintained on the 39 islands along with supplemental values of wildlife including bald eagle nesting and wintering sites. Long-term impacts from construction of a large reservoir would result in a loss of all wilderness values on islands 31-57. Islands 16-27 would retain their wilderness and supplemental values for the foreseeable future. | Wilderness characteristics of naturalness and primitive recreation would be protected on 37 islands which would benefit wildlife habitat (particularly bald eagle nesting areas) and scenic values. Wilderness character and wildlife habitat would be lost or degraded on 2 islands from recreation homesite development with or without wilderness designation. The threat of flooding from a large reservoir would no longer exist. | Wilderness characteristics of naturalness and primitive recreation would be protected on 11 islands which would benefit wildlife habitat (particularly bald eagle nesting areas) and scenic values. One of the islands in the partial alternative would lose wilderness character from recreation homesite development with or without designation. The remaining 27 islands would not receive long-term protection but, without the threat of inundation from reservoir construction, values would likely remain on 26 islands. 1 island, adjacent to the recreation homesite development, would be degraded. |
| Impacts to Threatened, Endangered and Candidate Species | Bald eagle populations would increase as projected under the Greater Yellowstone Bald Eagle Recovery Plan over the short term. Over the long term, dam construction would inundate habitat and 4 nests would be lost. Eaglet births would decrease from 10 per year to 3 per year and annual wintering populations would decrease from 40-80 birds to 10-20 birds. | Bald eagle populations would increase as projected under the Greater Yellowstone Bald Eagle Recovery Plan. 10 eaglets would be produced annually with 40-80 birds wintering along the river. | Bald eagle populations would increase as projected under the Greater Yellowstone Bald Eagle Recovery Plan. 10 eaglets would be produced annually with 40-80 birds wintering along the river. |
| Impacts to Power Site and Reclamation Project Development | No impacts would result to power site and reclamation project development. Options to construct projects would be left open. | Power site and reclamation withdrawals would be revoked and potential projects would not be allowed. | Power site and reclamation withdrawals would be revoked and potential projects would not be allowed. |

Local Social and Economic Considerations

Social and economic impacts were not considered a significant issue in the Snake River Islands Study.

Summary of WSA-Specific Public Comments

BLM's wilderness inventory and study were conducted with extensive public participation and public involvement was an important consideration in making wilderness recommendations. BLM solicited public involvement in the study phase through scoping meetings, a 90-day public comment period and three formal hearings on the Medicine Lodge Resource Management Plan/EIS (the Draft Medicine Lodge Wilderness EIS was part of the land use plan). Public involvement has occurred throughout the wilderness review process. Certain comments received during the inventory period and EIS scoping efforts were used to develop significant study issues and various alternatives for the ultimate management of those lands found to have wilderness value.

In the inventory stage, six commenters favored intensive inventory while three did not. One had no opinion. Those who favored further study stressed protection for the unique cottonwood-riparian system, excellent wildlife habitat and the high value of primitive recreation in the area. Irrigation structures, roads and mineral exploration were concerns of those who opposed further study of the islands.

During formal public review of the Draft EIS, 18 comments specifically addressing this WSA were received. In general, 11 comments supported wilderness designation for all or part of the WSA. Six commenters supported no wilderness for this WSA. One had no opinion.

Nine federal agencies commented on the Medicine Lodge Resource Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement containing the wilderness EIS but gave no wilderness-related comments. One state agency supported BLM's no wilderness recommendation because of the Lynn Crandall dam proposal.

No comments addressing the Snake River Islands WSA were received on the Medicine Lodge Wilderness Final EIS.