

Little City of Rocks Wilderness Study Area

1. The Study Area -- 5,875 acres

The Little City of Rocks WSA (ID-54-5) is located in Gooding County, Idaho. The WSA includes 5,875 acres of BLM-administered lands. There are no split estate lands within the area. There is a 640 acre inholding of state land within the WSA (see Table 1). Portions of the WSA's boundaries are formed by the following dirt roads: on the west and south by BLM Road 2412, the Burnt Willow Road; and on the north by County Road 2401, the Crist Cabin Road. The eastern boundary is formed by three materials sites and a power line right-of-way parallel to State Highway 46. A portion of the southern boundary follows a private property line. The WSA is one of five within the Mount Bennett Hills.

The Mount Bennett Hills are a belt of rolling foothills between the Sawtooth Mountains to the north and the Snake River Plains to the south. The major portion of the WSA is a gently sloping plain with several rhyolite bluffs. The WSA's south-central portion contains an aggregation of wind and water eroded rhyolite columns, collectively known as the Little City of Rocks.

The dominant vegetation of the WSA is sagebrush and grasses. Chokecherry and willows are found in shaded canyons of the Little City of Rocks. There is a small grove of aspen on the north-facing slope of the WSA's northern edge. Elevations range from 4,458 to 5,758 feet.

Several species of wildlife including elk, deer, coyote, birds of prey and upland game are found in the WSA.

The WSA was studied under Section 603 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) and included in the Shoshone/Sun Valley Final Environmental Impact Statement, Wilderness, filed in April 1986. Two alternatives were analyzed in the EIS: a no wilderness alternative, which is the recommendation of this report; and an all wilderness alternative.

2. Recommendation and Rationale

0 acres recommended for wilderness

5,875 acres recommended for nonwilderness

The recommendation for the Little City of Rocks WSA is to release all 5,875 acres for nonwilderness uses. 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 5,875 acres of federal land within the WSA are recommended nonsuitable for wilderness designation and are shown as the Little City of Rocks WSA on the Little City of Rocks Proposal map.

The quality of the wilderness values was the key consideration in the recommendation. While the WSA contained the wilderness values necessary for study, they are not considered to merit inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). There are no significant wildlife species or habitats, nor scientific or educational values in the area that would benefit from wilderness designation. There are geologic features in the area. However, similar geologic wilderness values of higher quality are recommended for wilderness designation within the nearby Gooding City of Rocks East and West WSAs.

The area's name is derived from the unusual rock formations concentrated in one major drainage in the south-central part of the WSA. Drainages dissecting alternating bands of hard and soft tuff and the weathering processes of freezing and thawing created the unusual rock formations that appear like stacks of coins, mushroom caps, arches, fins and pillars called "hoodoos." The formations cover approximately 2,000 acres (about 34 percent) of the Little City of Rocks WSA. These formations are similar to those found in the Gooding City of Rocks East and West WSAs but cover a much smaller area. The welded tuff rock formations in the Gooding City of Rocks East and West WSAs cover 12,000 acres, an area larger than the entire Little City of Rocks WSA.

The Little City of Rocks WSA is essentially natural. Two vehicle trails extend into the WSA but impacts on the area's naturalness are primarily due to sights and sounds outside the WSA. State Highway 46 and a power transmission line run along the eastern boundary of the WSA. The Gooding County Highway Department occasionally excavates materials from a gravel pit between Flat Top Butte and the northeast edge of the WSA. The Department has a right-of-way for the pit.

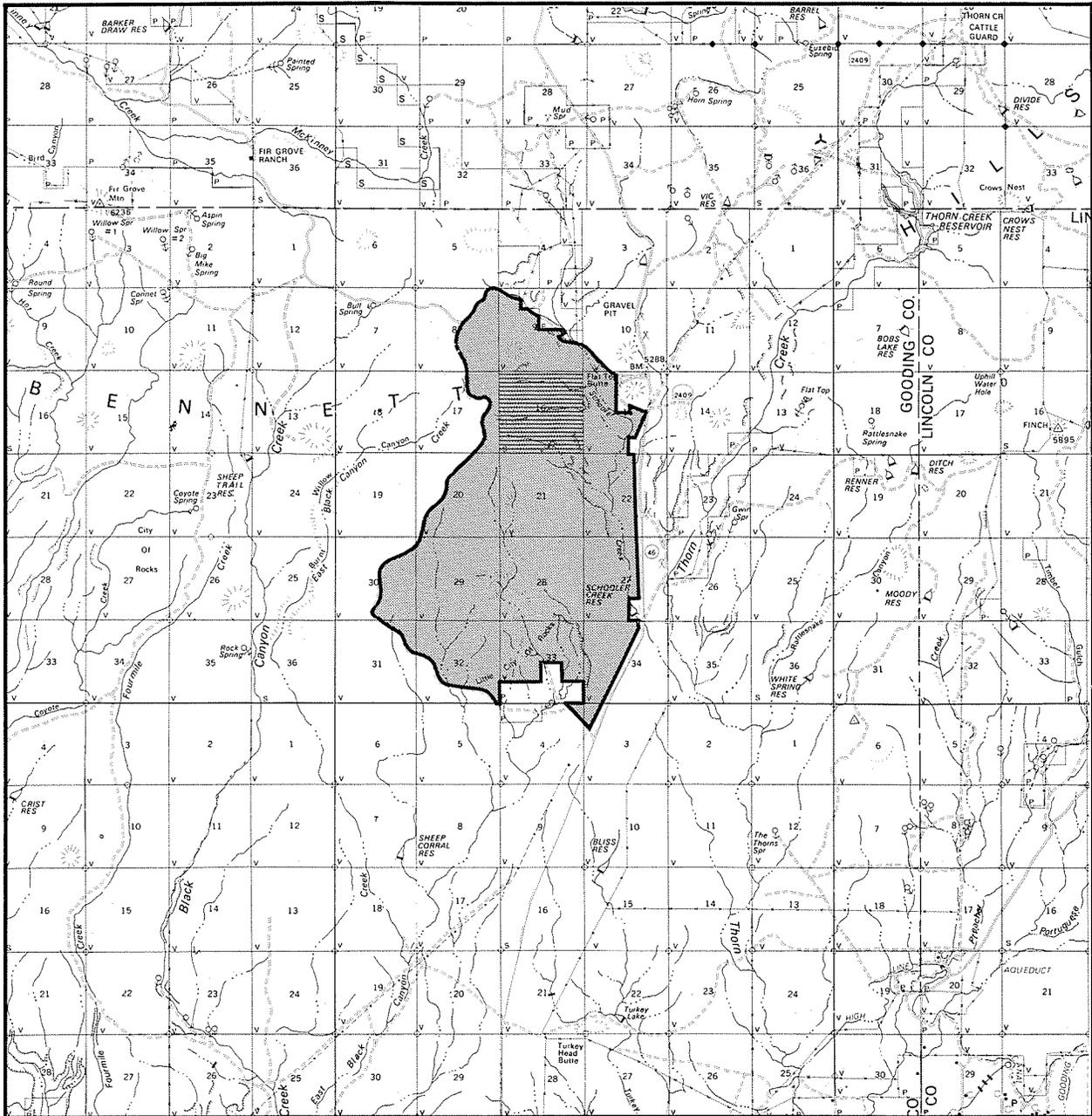
Opportunities for solitude are available in parts of the WSA, primarily the south-central part among the welded tuff rock formations. The rock formations are also the focal point for the primitive recreation opportunities. Most existing recreation use consists of day hiking, pleasure driving and mountain bike riding. The Little City of Rocks is easily accessible by road from State Highway 46. The recommendation would allow this type of recreation and access to continue. Motorized recreationists would have an opportunity to view and appreciate the rock formations. Those seeking similar, but nonmotorized opportunities, could visit the Gooding City of Rocks area.

The flat basalt plateau areas that comprise most of the WSA provide lower quality opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation because of the lack of topographic screening and interesting scenery. The eastern segment of the WSA between the edge of the plateau and State Highway 46 offers virtually no opportunities for solitude or primitive recreation. In addition, the relatively small size of the Little City of Rocks WSA diminishes the overall quality of opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation.

The Little City of Rocks WSA and Gooding City of Rocks East and West WSAs are all examples of the Sagebrush Province/Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem. This Bailey-Kuchler classification ecosystem is represented in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS) in Idaho in the Craters of the Moon Wilderness administered by the National Park Service (NPS).

Designation of any one of the three City of Rocks WSAs would add diversity in landforms to the NWPS. Through the wilderness study process, it was determined that the designation of 19,350 acres in the Gooding City of Rocks East and West WSAs represents a better opportunity to preserve the types of wilderness values found in the Bennett Hills (landforms, natural values, opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation and special features) than would designation of the Little City of Rocks WSA.

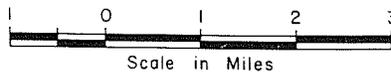
At the present time, there is little threat to the existing naturalness of the area. There are no known or projected activities, only minor geothermal potential, no known mineral potential and no valid rights of others in the WSA. Therefore, even without wilderness designation, the quality and level of values now found in the WSA are not expected to significantly change.



R. 14 E. | R. 15 E.

R. 15 E. | R. 16 E.

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



**ID-54-5
LITTLE CITY OF ROCKS
PROPOSAL**

MARCH 1988

T. 2 S.

T. 3 S.

T. 3 S.

T. 4 S.

**Table 1 -- Land Status and Acreage Summary of the Study Area
LITTLE CITY OF ROCKS WSA**

Within Wilderness Study Area

BLM (surface and subsurface)	5,875
Split Estate (BLM surface only)	0
Inholdings (state, private)	640
Total	6,515

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	5,875
Split Estate	0
Total BLM Land Not Recommended for Wilderness	5,875
Inholdings (state, private)	640

3. Criteria Considered in Developing the Wilderness Recommendations

Wilderness Characteristics

A. Naturalness

The Little City of Rocks WSA appears essentially natural. Two vehicle trails extend into the WSA for 1.4 miles; both receive light use. Several tracks from trail bike use can be seen within the WSA. These vehicle trails would revegetate if vehicle use were curtailed. These imprints are widely scattered and do not detract appreciably from the naturalness of the WSA.

Two developments adjacent to the WSA have a slight affect on perceptions of naturalness within the area. State Highway 46 parallels the eastern boundary of the WSA. Although a high bluff along the eastern edge of the area screens the sights and sounds of the highway from most of the WSA, the portion of the area between the bluffs and the eastern boundary (approximately 15 percent of the total WSA) is slightly affected by the presence of the highway. Outside the WSA's southeast corner, a circular gravel pit has been developed. At present, the gravel pit is not being used. Topography screens the pit from most of the WSA.

B. Solitude

In portions of the WSA, opportunities for solitude are outstanding. Topography, the WSA's boundary configuration and some vegetative screening combine to provide an opportunity for a limited number of visitors to avoid the sights and sounds of other visitors within the WSA. Topography includes two major types: (1) a rolling sagebrush plain surrounded by basalt bluffs; and (2) canyons rimmed with aggregations of tall, eroded columns of volcanic tuff. The rock formations and basalt bluffs allow visitors to disperse and enjoy seclusion in the canyons. The sagebrush plain provides a lower quality of solitude since visitors can see each other over a greater distance.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

The Little City of Rocks WSA offers a diversity of primitive recreation opportunities. Among them are photography, camping and nature study. Although the size of the WSA limits extensive hiking, the WSA offers high-quality opportunities for day or overnight hikes. The area's unusual, easily accessible geologic features are a common destination point for both motorized and nonmotorized recreationists.

D. Special Features

In the Little City of Rocks WSA, spectacular landforms occur within a single drainage and include columns, hoodoos, arches and monoliths. These landforms display weathering processes and structural anomalies that are picturesque and unusual.

Diversity in the National Wilderness Preservation System

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

Wilderness designation of the Little City of Rocks WSA would add an ecosystem presently represented in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS) by one designated area with 30,245 acres. There are 11 other BLM study areas in the state under study with this ecosystem. This information is summarized on Table 2.

TABLE 2

Ecosystem Representation

Bailey-Kuchler Classification	<u>NWPS Areas</u>		<u>Other BLM Studies</u>	
	areas	acres	areas	acres
Intermountain Sagebrush Province				
<u>NATIONWIDE</u>				
Desert-Vegetation Largely Absent Ecosystem	1	30,245	12	870,403
<u>IDAHO</u>				
Desert-Vegetation Largely Absent Ecosystem	1	30,245	11	646,687
<u>NEVADA</u>				
Desert-Vegetation Largely Absent Ecosystem	0	0	1	223,716

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

The Little City of Rocks 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 center.

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 the cities of Provo, Orem and Ogden, Utah.

C. Balancing the Geographic Distribution of Wilderness Areas

The Little City of Rocks WSA would not contribute to balancing the geographic distribution of areas within the NWPS. The NPS-administered Craters of the Moon Wilderness (43,243 acres) representing a similar ecosystem is a two-hour drive to the northeast. The Little City of Rocks WSA, however, would add a landform to the NWPS that is very different from that represented in the Craters of the Moon Wilderness.

Manageability

The Little City of Rocks WSA can be managed reasonably as wilderness to preserve values now present in the area. Conflicts with other resources and uses are minimal. The state land inholding in the area is used solely for grazing. Based on the mineral resources analysis, no mineral development on this parcel is anticipated.

The vehicle route to the Little City of Rocks Canyon on the WSA's southern boundary present a minor potential manageability conflict. This vehicle route is used by recreationists going to the Little City of Rocks to hike and to view the rock formations. Wilderness management would require physical blockage of the route on the wilderness boundary, signing and patrolling the area to prevent vehicle use in the canyon.

Energy and Minerals Resource Values

Except for the state land inholding, all surface and mineral estates in the WSA are in federal ownership and are open to mineral entry. The Little City of Rocks WSA has low potential for oil, gas and coal, and moderate potential for geothermal energy. This classification is based on U.S. Geologic Survey studies on the WSAs to the west.

Based on the unfavorable geologic environment, the WSA is classified as having low potential for other leasable minerals. There are no mineral leases in the WSA. The WSA is classified as having low potential for locatable mineral resources. This classification is based on the geology and absence of mining claims and historic activity. There are no mining claims in the WSA.

Building stone exists in limited quantities within the Little City of Rocks WSA. This material has produced little interest and no sales. The stone is limited in quantity, is relatively inaccessible and adequate sources of similar building stone are available in other locations. There are no other known saleable minerals within the Little City of Rocks WSA.

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-54-5 (LITTLE CITY OF ROCKS)

ISSUE TOPICS	PROPOSED ACTION (NO WILDERNESS/NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE)	ALL WILDERNESS ALTERNATIVE
Impacts on Wilderness Values	The WSA's naturalness would be lost in areas of concentrated ORV use. Recreational ORV use would reduce opportunities for solitude.	All wilderness values would receive long-term Congressional protection. All wilderness values would be maintained. Naturalness and opportunities for solitude would improve slightly.
Impacts on Recreational ORV Use	There would be no impact on recreational ORV use.	Recreational ORV use of 1,500 visitor days would be foregone annually. Impacts of shifting this use to other public lands would be negligible.
Impacts on Development of Mineral Resources	Potential mineral resources would be available for development. This includes moderate to high potential for low temperature geothermal resources. There would be no impact to development of mineral resources.	Development of potential mineral resources would be foregone. This includes moderate to high potential for low temperature geothermal resources.
Impacts on Grazing Facility Maintenance and Construction	There would be no impact on grazing facility maintenance and construction.	There would be no impact on grazing facility maintenance and construction.

Local Social and Economic Considerations

Social and economic factors were not considered a significant issue in the study.

Summary of WSA-Specific Public Comments

Public involvement has occurred throughout the wilderness review process. During public review of the Draft EIS, 26 comments supporting wilderness designation of the Little City of Rocks WSA were received. Seven of these contained no supporting reasons for their position. Comments with supporting reasons addressed the area's wilderness values, lack of resource conflicts, manageability and specific wilderness resources including wildlife, recreation, scenery and cultural resources and the area's preservation values. Six comments addressed the area contributing to expanding diversity in the NWPS. Nine comments addressed the opportunity to designate a significant wilderness complex in the Mount Bennett Hills. The area's small size and easy access were also given as reasons supporting wilderness designation.

Five comments were received opposing wilderness designation of the area. Two of these contained no supporting reasons for their position. Comments with supporting reasons stated that the area looks like the rest of Idaho, is best suited for other uses, or is not unique.

The Board of Camas County Commissioners opposed any more wilderness in Idaho. The Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, Department of Water Quality and Office of the Attorney General, the U.S. Department Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Reclamation and the Environmental Protection Agency letters contained no WSA-specific comments.