

Shale Butte Wilderness Study Area

1. The Study Area -- 15,968 acres

The Shale Butte WSA (ID-57-2) is located in Lincoln County 26 miles east of Shoshone, Idaho. The WSA includes 15,968 acres of BLM-administered lands. There are no split estate lands or inholdings within the area (see Table 1). The WSA boundaries are formed primarily by the following dirt roads: on the west by an unnamed nonsystem road and County Road 3208, the Trapper Cabin Road; on the north by BLM Road 3208, the Trapper Cabin Road; and on the east by an unnamed nonsystem road. The southern boundary is located along a legal section line.

The Shale Butte area is an older lava flow which rises 100 to 300 feet above the surrounding plain. The lava flow has been largely covered by wind-deposited soil but exposed lava formations are common. The perimeter of the lava flow is rugged with sloping basalt faces up to 50 feet high. Elevations within the WSA range from 4,250 feet at the southern boundary to 4,578 feet at the summit of Shale Butte.

The present dominant vegetation in the WSA, especially the southern part of the area, is cheatgrass, a non-native species that invaded after repeated wildfires. Periodic large wildfires, limited native grass seed in the area and the competitive nature of cheatgrass prevent the occurrence of the potential natural plant community, Wyoming big sagebrush with a bluebunch wheatgrass and associated grass and forb understory.

The WSA was studied under Section 603 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) and included in the Monument Final Environmental Impact Statement, Wilderness (EIS), filed in July 1987. 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

15,968 acres recommended for nonwilderness

The recommendation for the Shale Butte WSA is to release all 15,968 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. However, the recommendation for this WSA allows for restoration of vegetative diversity in an area where fire and invasion of non-native cheatgrass has created a vegetative "monoculture." The recommendation would facilitate implementation of the Wildhorse Shrub Restoration Plan (1987), returning the area to a more natural ecosystem in the long term.

All 15,968 acres of federal land within the WSA are recommended nonsuitable for wilderness designation and are shown as the Shale Butte WSA on the Shale Butte Proposal map.

The no wilderness recommendation for this area is based on several factors. The natural values of the Shale Butte WSA are marginal. The no wilderness recommendation would allow greater flexibility to restore and maintain big game habitat and control wildfire in the Wildhorse area of the Monument Resource Area. In addition, the Shale Butte WSA would not add diversity to the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS), it does not exhibit any significant or unusual special features and it would be difficult to manage as wilderness.

Human imprints in the Shale Butte WSA are minimal and have little cumulative impact on the area's natural values. However, the WSA's naturalness has been significantly affected by a history of repeated large wildfires in the Wildhorse area. In 1981, the entire Shale Butte WSA burned. Cheatgrass, a non-native invader, prevents reestablishment of native plant species after a fire and is now a dominant species in the WSA. Shrub protection is a high priority fire management objective for the Shale Butte WSA (Monument Limited Fire Suppression Plan, BLM, 1985).

The Shale Butte WSA is within the area covered by the Wildhorse Greenstripping/Shrub Restoration Plan (1987). The purpose of the plan is to restore big game winter habitat burned by wildfires. Projects outlined in the plan are designed to decrease fire frequency, reduce fire size and reestablish shrubs and other vegetation in burned areas. Several areas in the Shale Butte WSA are identified for rehabilitation in the Wildhorse Plan. Wilderness management would preclude the use of mechanical equipment and non-native plant species in rehabilitation of these areas.

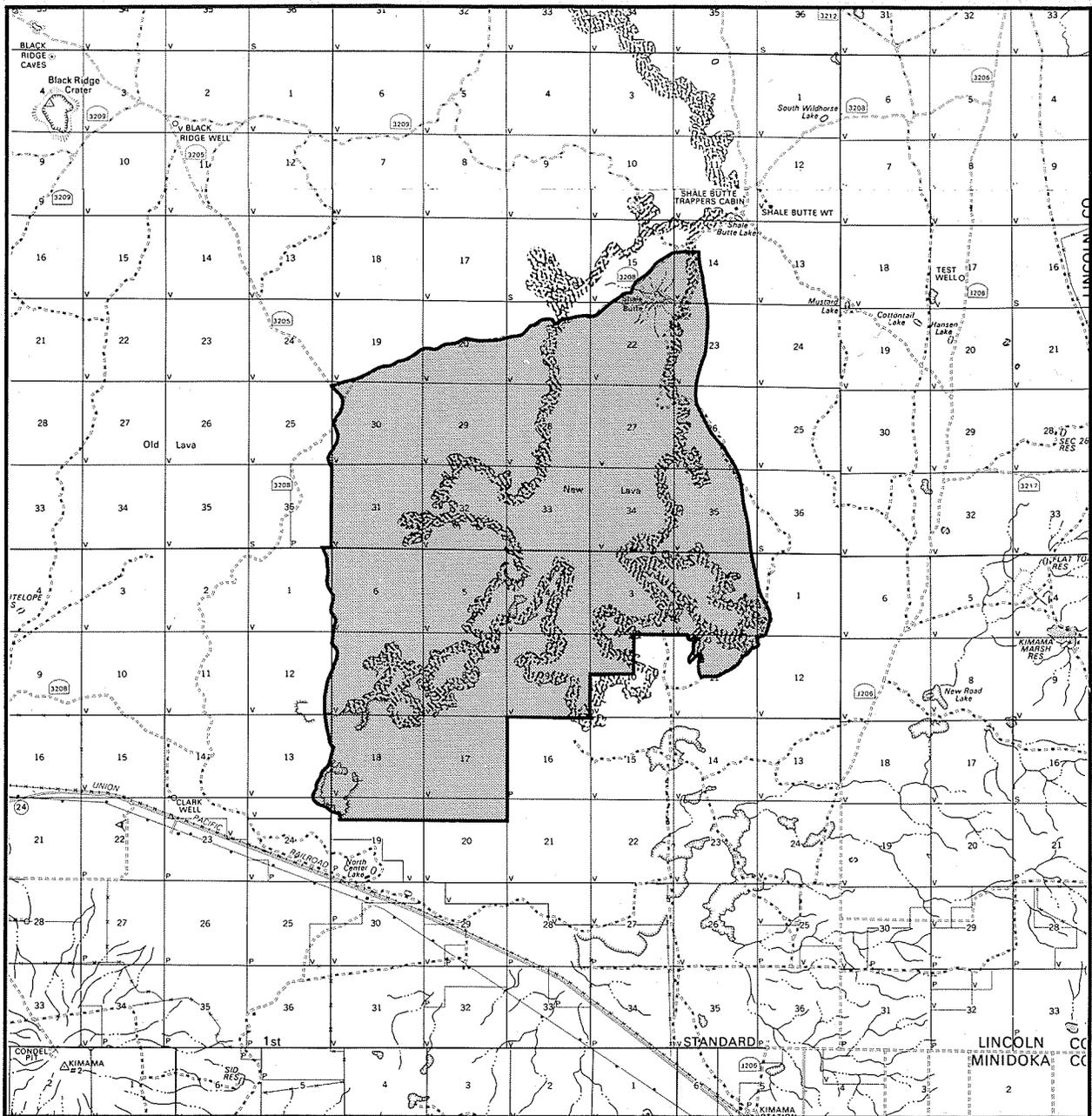
Wilderness management would also restrict fire suppression activities in the WSA. It is predicted that under wilderness management, fires would burn in the WSA every four years on the average. This would hamper shrub restoration and protection efforts and maintain cheatgrass as a dominant species.

Nondesignation is recommended because it would allow greater flexibility and savings in achieving the goals of the Wildhorse Plan. The no wilderness alternative would most likely result in a more natural ecosystem in the Shale Butte WSA in the long term.

The Great Basin Province/Desert Ecosystem (3130-39) is the only potential ecosystem presented in the WSA. The Craters of the Moon Wilderness (43,243 acres) administered by the National Park Service (NPS) currently represents this ecosystem in the NWPS. Designation of Shale Butte as wilderness would not add diversity to the NWPS.

The supplemental features of the Shale Butte WSA are not significant. Although the lava flows of Shale Butte are of interest because they exemplify volcanism on the Snake River Plain, they are not unique. All features of the Shale Butte lavas can be found in the Craters of the Moon Wilderness and other BLM WSAs in the Monument Resource Area. Two BLM sensitive species, the burrowing owl and long-billed curlew, may exist in the area. However, these species would not be affected if the area is not designated wilderness.

Existing livestock operations would affect opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation. These opportunities would be degraded by the sights and sounds of vehicles moving and servicing sheep camps on vehicle ways in the WSA.

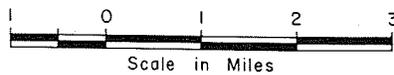


T. 5 S.
T. 6 S.
T. 6 S.

R. 21 E. | R. 22 E.

R. 22 E. | R. 23 E.

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



**ID-57-2
SHALE BUTTE
PROPOSAL**

APRIL 1988

**Table 1 -- Land Status and Acreage Summary of the Study Area
SHALE BUTTE WSA**

Within Wilderness Study Area

BLM (surface and subsurface)	15,968
Split Estate (BLM surface only)	0
Inholdings (state, private)	0
Total	15,968

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	15,968
Split Estate	0
Total BLM Land Not Recommended for Wilderness	15,968
Inholdings (state, private)	0

3. Criteria Considered in Developing the Wilderness Recommendations

Wilderness Characteristics

A. Naturalness

The Shale Butte WSA is essentially natural in appearance. The majority of the WSA appears to the average viewer to be unaffected by human works.

Several species of wildlife including antelope, deer, bobcat, coyote, birds of prey and upland game and non-game are found in low numbers in the WSA. The area is historic mule deer and antelope winter range but has not been used much in recent years because of shrub cover loss through wildfire.

The most significant impact on the WSA's apparent naturalness is attributed to the area's fire history. Frequent wildfires have greatly reduced sagebrush throughout much of the WSA and the area around it. Cheatgrass, a non-native plant species, has become the WSA's dominant vegetation. However, to the uninformed visitor, the existing vegetation could be perceived as natural.

Three seeded areas are within the boundaries of the Shale Butte WSA. A 1,280 acre fire rehabilitation seeding is located on the WSA's southern edge. Sagebrush was seeded aurally in this area in 1972.

A 960 acre wildlife habitat rehabilitation seeding is located on the WSA's eastern edge. The aerial seeding of fourwing saltbush, bitterbrush and sagebrush was done in 1982.

The aerial seedings have had little or no impact on the natural values of the Shale Butte WSA. A 300-foot strip along the northern WSA boundary road was drill seeded with crested wheatgrass in 1982. The purpose of the crested wheatgrass seeding was two-fold: to form a fire-resistant greenstrip and to crowd out infestations of halogeton, a noxious weed poisonous to both wildlife and livestock. The crested wheatgrass seeding drill rows are somewhat evident along the northern boundary road of the WSA.

Six minor vehicle trails are found within the Shale Butte WSA. Prior to its blading, the route in T. 5 S., R. 22 E., Sections 21 and 28 was the longest and most noticeable of the routes. Generally, the trails have, or would have after rehabilitation, little cumulative effect on the natural values of the Shale Butte WSA.

B. Solitude

Outside sights and sounds somewhat diminish opportunities. Boundary roads are located on three sides of the WSA. Vehicles on these roads are visible from the periphery of the WSA. The boundary roads and traffic on them can be seen and occasionally heard from the WSA's higher elevations. In addition, the Union Pacific Railroad's main track lies two miles south of the WSA. The train traffic averages one train an hour and is noticeable from many locations in the southern part of the WSA. Visitors could hear the trains throughout most of the WSA on a quiet night.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

The Shale Butte WSA provides a variety of recreation opportunities. The rugged volcanic features and desert environment provide opportunities for camping, hiking and hunting. Nonmotorized recreation use in the WSA is estimated at less than 100 visitor days annually. The combination of monotonous landscape and lack of water and destination spots probably accounts for the low visitor use figures. Hot summer temperatures and cold winters limit visitor use to the spring and fall.

D. Special Features

The WSA does not contain any significant or unusual features.

Diversity in the National Wilderness Preservation System

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

Wilderness designation of the Shale Butte WSA would add an ecosystem presently represented in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). This ecosystem is represented by three designated areas with 76,699 acres. There are 35 other BLM areas in the state under study with this ecosystem. This information is summarized in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Ecosystem Representation

Bailey-Kuchler Classification	NWPS Areas		Other BLM Studies	
	areas	acres	areas	acres
Dry Domain/Intermountain Sagebrush Province				
			<u>NATIONWIDE</u>	
Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem	3	76,699	136	4,359,340
			<u>IDAHO</u>	
Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem	1	12,997	35	949,916
			<u>NEVADA</u>	
Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem	1	32,407	29	1,273,919
			<u>CALIFORNIA</u>	
Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem	0	0	5	152,431
			<u>OREGON</u>	
Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem	0	0	67	1,983,074

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

The Shale Butte WSA is within a five-hour drive from Boise, Idaho. 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	16	4,741,570	141	5,374,250

C. Balancing the Geographic Distribution of Wilderness Areas

The Shale Butte 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) is a one-hour drive to the north. The lava flow and vegetative values within the Craters of the Moon Wilderness are superior in every respect to those of the Shale Butte WSA. Therefore, designation of the Shale Butte WSA as wilderness would not help balance the geographic distribution of opportunities to attain diverse wilderness experiences.

Manageability

The Shale Butte WSA could be managed to maintain existing wilderness values. However, the existing natural values are marginal because of the destruction of native vegetation by wildfires and subsequent invasion of cheatgrass. Destruction of shrubs has greatly reduced the value of the area as big game winter habitat. Efforts to restore big game habitat and vegetative diversity would be limited under wilderness management because of prohibitions on the use of mechanical equipment.

Existing livestock operations would slightly complicate administration of wilderness. The primary use of vehicle ways in the northern and eastern parts of the WSA is for access to sheep bed grounds. From April 1 to June 15 and from October 16 to December 31, permittees use the ways to move and service sheep camps at the bed grounds. The sights and sounds of vehicle use at these times would degrade opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation.

Energy and Minerals Resource Values

The Shale Butte WSA has zero petroleum potential, is classified as not prospectively valuable for geothermal resources (BLM 1985) and has low potential for locatable and saleable minerals.

The mineral estates in the WSA are in federal ownership and are open to mineral entry. There are no mineral leases within the WSA. There are approximately 320 acres of mining claims within the WSA.

Impacts on Resources

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

Table 4
Comparative Summary of the Impacts by Alternative
WSA ID-57-2 (SHALE BUTTE)

ISSUE TOPICS	PROPOSED ACTION (NO WILDERNESS/NO ACTION)	ALL WILDERNESS ALTERNATIVE
Impacts on Wilderness Values	<p>Restoration of vegetation would improve big game habitat and would return the area to a more natural ecosystem in the long term.</p> <p>Surface-distributing fire suppression activities would moderately degrade apparent naturalness. Sheep camp related vehicle use would adversely impact opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation from April 16 to June 15 and from October 31 to December 31 in 15% of the WSA. Recreational ORV use would slightly reduce all wilderness values.</p> <p>Low-use vehicle trails would be maintained by ORV travel with the possibility of being expanded slightly. No increase in visitor use above current levels is projected.</p>	<p>All wilderness values would receive long-term Congressional protection. Wilderness values would be maintained on all 15,968 acres of the Shale Butte WSA. All wilderness values would benefit slightly because of the elimination of ORV use. Sheep camp related vehicle use would adversely impact opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation in approximately 15% of the WSA from April 16 to June 15 and from October 16 to December 31.</p>
Impacts on Development of Locatable Mineral Resources	<p>There would be no impact on development of locatable mineral resources. Potential mineral resources would be available for development.</p>	<p>Development of potential mineral resources would be foregone adversely affecting locatable mineral resources of low potential in the Shale Butte WSA.</p>
Impacts on Livestock Grazing Operations	<p>Existing sheep operating procedures would continue. The level of grazing use would decrease 40 AUMs or 2%.</p>	<p>Existing sheep operating procedures would continue. The level of grazing use would decrease 161 AUMs or 8%.</p>
Impacts on Fire Management	<p>There would be no impact on fire management.</p>	<p>Full suppression including use of pumper trucks, helicopters and bulldozers within the WSA would not occur.</p>

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 occurred throughout the wilderness review process.

During public review of the Draft EIS, a total of nine comments supporting wilderness designation were received. Eight of these comments contained no supporting reasons for their position. One comment supported wilderness designation because the area offered unique wilderness opportunities and deserves protection. No comments opposing wilderness designation were received.

The U.S. Department of Energy, Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, U.S. Department of Transportation, Environmental Protection Agency, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Department of Health and Welfare, Department of Lands, Transportation Department, Department of Water Resources and Idaho State Historical Society commented on the Draft EIS.