

Black Butte Wilderness Study Area

1. The Study Area -- 4,068 acres

The Black Butte WSA (ID-54-2) is located in Lincoln and Blaine Counties 17 miles north of Shoshone, Idaho. The WSA includes 4,068 acres of BLM-administered lands. There are no split estate lands or inholdings within the area (see Table 1). The WSA's boundaries are formed by the following dirt roads: on the south by BLM Road 3216, the Buck Lake Road; on the west by BLM Road 3210; on the north by BLM Road 1302, the West Magic Road; and on the east by State Highway 75. The boundary also follows a property line around one state section and two private holdings.

The WSA is dominated by Black Butte, an inactive volcano of recent origin (4,000 to 6,000 years ago) rising about 200 feet above the surrounding older lava plateau. The vent of this volcano is an irregularly shaped subsidence crater up to .5 mile wide and 80 to 200 feet deep. The crater contains a jumbled variety of lava benches, cliffs, jagged outcrops, lava tubes and vents. The flanks of Black Butte are covered with young lava that has fractured into polygonal plates up to four feet across and one to six inches thick.

The basalt in the area varies in color from black to purplish-black on the exposed desert varnished surfaces with a dull, brownish-red on the under surface. Removal of dark surface lava slabs has resulted in the exposure of brownish-red lava under layers.

Although the younger lava and the crater are virtually devoid of vegetation, the lower flanks of the Butte support a mixed shrub-grass community.

The WSA was studied under Section 202 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) and included in the Proposed Plan Amendments and Final Environmental Impact Statement for Small Wilderness Study Areas Statewide filed in September 1989. 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

4,068 acres recommended for nonwilderness

The recommendation for the Black Butte WSA is to not designate the area as wilderness and release all 4,068 acres for other 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 4,068 acres of federal land within the WSA are recommended nonsuitable for wilderness designation and are shown as the Black Butte WSA on the Black Butte Proposal map.

The quality of the wilderness values was a key consideration in the recommendation. While the WSA contained the wilderness values necessary for study, it is not considered to merit the area's inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). The Black Butte WSA would not add quality and diversity to the National Wilderness Preservation System. Due to the proximity to State Highway 75, the small size of the WSA and mining activity, solitude opportunities available in the WSA are inferior to those afforded by thousands of acres of land, primarily lava flows, which are found in the Shoshone District.

Another key consideration was the fact that the area is not manageable as wilderness due to the mining activity that is occurring under the Surface Management (1872 Mining Law) regulation 3809. The naturalness of the Black Butte WSA has been severely impacted by lava rock mining activity. Areas of lava rock removal are distinguished by the reddish surface exposed after removal of the black lava plates. Due to this color contrast, the removal areas appear as visual scars and intensively mined areas are visible from a distance.

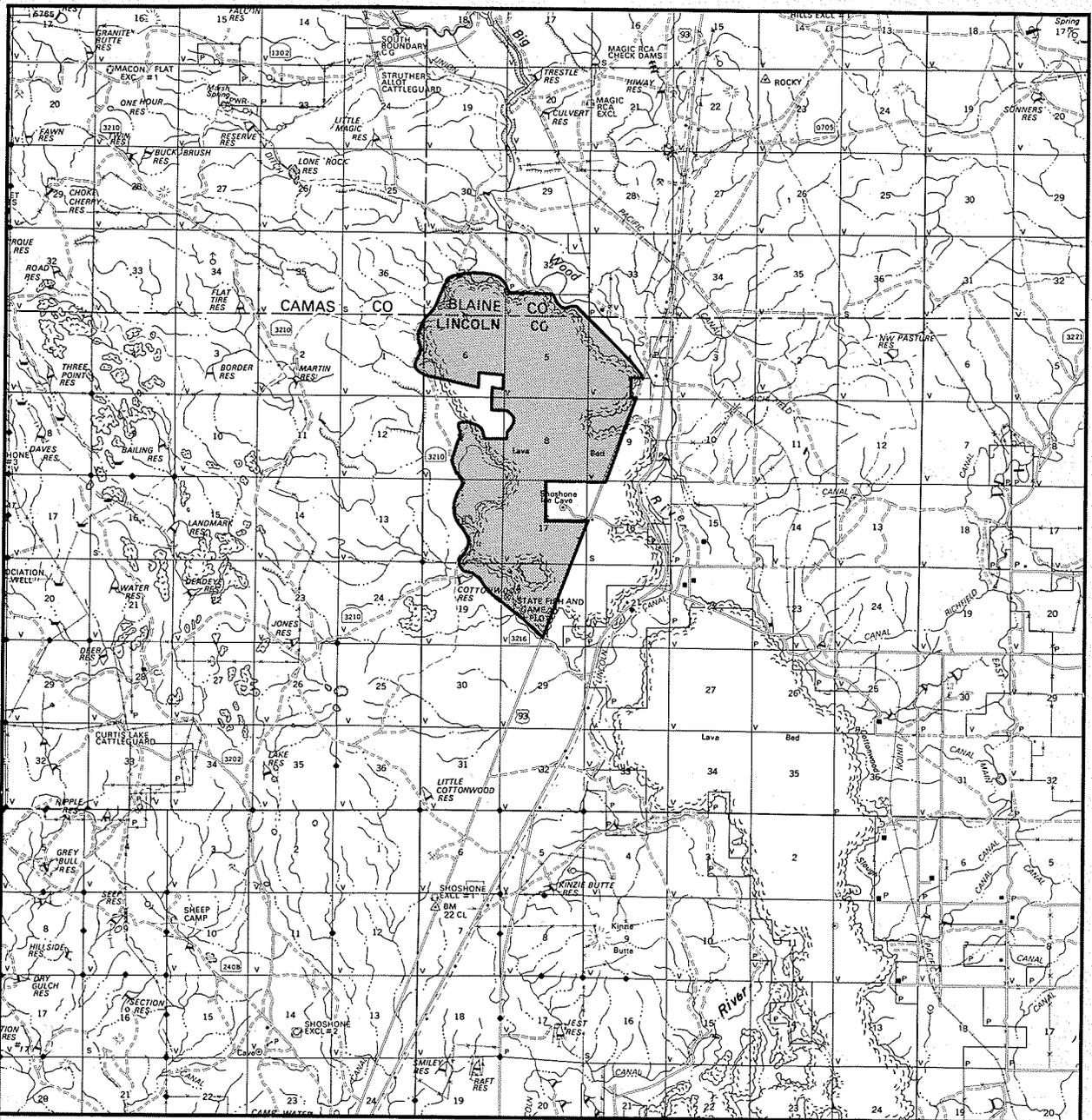
A network of roads and trails created to support mining wind over and around the Butte in the central part of the WSA. Even when the surface lava is not removed, heavy equipment on the roads and trails has broken and crushed the plated lava surface, changing its color and texture. This results in obvious roads and trails that cannot be reclaimed. A trespass road built in 1986 leads from State Highway 75 to the crater. This road has a significant impact on the area's naturalness and cannot be reclaimed.

Within the WSA boundary, removal of the veneer lava would continue on the 510 acres of claims determined in 1981 to be valid. Including the operations approved in 1986, mining activity would expand to an estimated 1,000 additional acres. An estimated total of over 1500 acres, or 37 percent of the total area of the WSA, would be disturbed by mining and primitive roads. The surface disturbance would occur primarily in the central part of the WSA on and around Black Butte crater. Disturbed areas would be distinguished by the reddish-colored surface exposed after removal of the dark brown or black veneer lava. The disturbance would be obvious and the area's apparent naturalness would be lost on all disturbed areas. Vehicles and equipment working in the area would reduce opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation. Reclamation would not restore a natural appearance.

The naturalness of the WSA has been further altered from a user-built project, Two Pits Reservoir, located just within the north boundary. The reservoir consists of two pits, each about four feet deep, 50 feet wide and 75 feet long. These pits are not noticeable from a distance but are obviously unnatural at close range. The reservoir contains water during the spring and remains dry the rest of the year.

Although the Black Butte WSA offers opportunities to study the vegetative and geologic features of a young aa lava flow, similar ecosystems and geologic features of higher wilderness quality are recommended for wilderness designation within the Great Rift and Raven's Eye WSAs located one hour northeast of the WSA.

The Great Rift (355,850 acres) and Raven's Eye (67,110 acres) WSAs contain ecosystems and geologic features similar to those in the Black Butte WSA. The Great Rift and Raven's Eye WSAs, however, have higher quality wilderness values because of their large size, greater diversity of lava flow features and vegetation, and reduced influence from human works. Recommendation of these WSAs as wilderness is adequate to represent Snake River Plain desert lava flow ecosystem features and opportunities in the NWPS. The Great Rift and Raven's Eye WSAs also provide much higher quality opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation than does the Black Butte WSA.

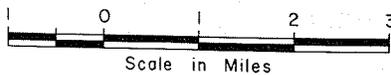


T. 2 S.
 T. 3 S.
 T. 3 S.
 T. 4 S.

R. 17 E. | R. 18 E.

R. 18 E. | R. 19 E.

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



**ID-54-2
 BLACK BUTTE
 PROPOSAL**

JANUARY 1989

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

Within Wilderness Study Area

BLM (surface and subsurface)	4,068
Split Estate (BLM surface only)	0
Inholdings (state, private)	0
 Total	 4,068

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	4,068
Split Estate	0
 Total BLM Land Not Recommended for Wilderness	 4,068
 Inholdings (state, private)	 0

3. Criteria Considered in Developing the Wilderness Recommendations

Wilderness Characteristics

A. Naturalness

The naturalness of the Black Butte WSA has been significantly reduced by lava rock mining. The majority of the existing impacts cannot be restored to a natural appearance. Portions of the WSA outside the mining area remain natural in appearance. These areas include Black Butte's southern flanks, the interior crater and most of the southern part of the WSA.

B. Solitude

The topographic variety of the crater and lava flow provides outstanding opportunities for solitude and isolation from the sights and sounds of others. However, the small size of the WSA limits opportunities for solitude if many visitors were in the WSA at the same time.

Roads in the WSA and surrounding area detract from a feeling of solitude. Traffic on State Highway 75 on the mining roads can be seen and heard from the WSA's higher elevations. The Shoshone Ice Caves, which has about 40,000 visitors per year, can be seen from the WSA.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

The Black Butte WSA provides a variety of recreation opportunities. The rugged volcanic features and desert environment provide outstanding opportunities for camping, hiking, geologic study and photography. Camping and hiking are challenging due to the rough lava and steep slopes. Some hunting also occurs, primarily on the lower slopes and western part of the WSA. Visits usually occur in the spring and fall, probably due to severe temperature extremes during the summer and winter months.

D. Special Features

Black Butte is a recent basaltic shield cone (4,000 to 6,000 years old) which rises 200 feet above the surrounding older lava plateau. Near the cone are volcanic features such as lava channels and tubes, foamy pahoehoe sheet flows, aa flows and a central subsidence crater. These features are fresh and represent an uncommon occurrence of volcanic landforms. The WSA is an example of recent volcanic activity and is easily accessible from State Highway 75. Because of this, the area offers an exceptional interpretive opportunity.

There is outstanding potential in the Black Butte WSA for an interpretive site that could be built off Highway 75. The site could include parking space, sanitary facilities, interpretive signs and a nature trail leading to the center of the crater. Interpretation could focus on the geology and fauna associated with relatively recent volcanic activity. The interpretive site would be unique to the local area. The nearest site that interprets similar landforms is Craters of the Moon, two hours to the northeast.

Diversity in the National Wilderness Preservation System

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

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

TABLE 2

Ecosystem Representation

Bailey-Kuchler Classification	NWPS Areas		Other BLM Studies	
	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 Black 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 Black 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), representing a similar landform and ecosystem, is a five-mile drive to the northeast. Designation of the Black Butte WSA as wilderness would not help balance the geographic distribution of opportunities to attain diverse wilderness experiences.

Manageability

The WSA would not be manageable as wilderness due to locatable mining claim activities. Since the Black Butte WSA is less than 5,000 acres, locatable mining activity is exempt from the nonimpairment criteria for the Wilderness Interim Management Policy and is regulated under the 43 CFR 3809 Regulations, "Surface Management of Public Lands Under U.S. Mining Laws" (November 26, 1980). Mining activity regulated under the 3809 regulations may impair wilderness values and will severely affect the ability to manage the area as wilderness.

Veneer lava in the Black Butte area consists of polygonal plates three to four feet wide and one to six inches thick. The thin sheets of lava are economically valuable because they are lightweight and possess a color and texture combination popular for decorative building.

Removal of lava rock from the Black Butte area has been occurring since the early 1970s. BLM established a community pit on the west side of the crater in 1973. In 1981 Black Butte lava was determined to be a locatable mineral and validity determination confirmed eleven placer mining claims. During 1986 and 1987, two CFR 3809 mining claim Plan of Operations and Environmental Assessments were approved.

Energy and Minerals Resource Values

The Black Butte WSA has no petroleum potential and moderate potential for geothermal resources (BLM, 1989).

As described, the area has a high value for locatable and saleable minerals due to the decorative lava rock. Extraction of veneer lava would continue on the 510 acres covered by valid mining claims and up to 1,000 additional acres, depending on the outcome of validity examinations.

The mineral estates in the WSA are in federal ownership and open to mineral entry. There are no mineral leases within the 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-54-2 (BLACK BUTTE)

ISSUE TOPICS	PROPOSED ACTION (NO WILDERNESS ALTERNATIVE/NO ACTION)	ALL WILDERNESS ALTERNATIVE
Impacts on Wilderness Values	All wilderness values would be lost on over 1,500 acres disturbed by extraction of veneer lava. Apparent naturalness would be lost in approximately 37% of the WSA. The surface disturbance would be visible and obvious in the majority of the WSA. Because of the reduction in naturalness, the values of Black Butte for geologic studies would be reduced.	Some wilderness values would receive the special legislative protection provided by wilderness designation. Extraction of veneer lava would continue on the 510 acres now covered by valid mining claims and all other claims determined to be valid. All wilderness values would be lost in the areas of surface disturbance. The disturbed areas could not be reclaimed.
Impacts on Lava Mining	All lands within the WSA would remain open for mineral entry. All locatable lava rock would be available for location of mining claims and development.	Within the WSA, extraction of veneer lava would continue on the 510 acres covered by valid mining claims and on up to 1,000 additional acres, depending on the outcome of validity examinations. After designation, other areas of veneer lava within the wilderness area would not be available for location of mining claims and development.
Impacts on Motorized Recreation	The entire area would be open to ORV use. There would be no impact on motorized recreation.	Recreational ORV use of less than 75 visitor days would be displaced annually. The impact of shifting this use to other public lands would be negligible.

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. Public hearings were held in Challis, Boise and Idaho Falls.

During public review of the Draft EIS, 27 letters were received. Fifteen specifically supported wilderness designation with four comments supporting a suitable recommendation for Black Butte. One comment stated support for the recommendation only because the area had lost its natural values. Six letters supported nonwilderness designation with two specifically identifying Black Butte. None of their comments addressed objections to the recommendation on Black Butte WSA.

The U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, Bureau of Indian Affairs, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Environmental Protection Agency, Idaho Department of Health and Welfare and Idaho State Historical Society commented on the Draft EIS.