

Little Wood River Wilderness Study Area

1. The Study Area -- 4,265 acres

The Little Wood River WSA (ID-53-4) is located in Blaine County, Idaho. The WSA includes 4,265 acres of BLM-administered lands in two parcels. The eastern parcel contains 825 acres; the western parcel contains 3,440 acres. Both are contiguous with the U.S. Forest Service Pioneer Mountains RARE II Area. There are no state or private inholdings within the WSA. A 120-acre parcel of state land is bounded on the east, south and west by the Little Wood River WSA and on the north by the Pioneer Mountains RARE II Area. Private, state and U.S. Forest Service lands define the boundary of the WSA with the exception of a short section of unnamed, nonsystem jeep trail on the WSA's eastern boundary.

The WSA is entirely within the Elk Mountain Crucial Elk Winter Range Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC). The WSA makes up approximately 55 percent of the public lands within the 11,887-acre ACEC. The ACEC is managed primarily for the long-term protection of winter habitat for elk.

The Little Wood River WSA is characterized by mountainous terrain cut by steep drainages. Drainages include the Little Wood River, Chicken Creek, Buck Creek and Brown Creek. The Little Wood River is lined with a dense riparian zone which includes cottonwoods and willows. At lower elevations, the area's vegetation is dominated by big sagebrush interspersed with grasses. As elevations increase, Douglas-fir stands and quaking aspen groves become common. Elevations range from 5,620 feet to 7,879 feet.

The WSA was studied under Section 202 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) and included in the Proposed Plan Amendments and Environmental Impact Statement for Small Wilderness Study Areas Statewide filed in September 1989. Two alternatives were analyzed in the EIS: an all wilderness alternative, which is the recommendation of this report, and a no wilderness alternative.

2. Recommendation and Rationale

4,265 acres recommended for wilderness

0 acres recommended for nonwilderness

The recommendation for the Little Wood River WSA is to designate 4,265 acres as wilderness. The environmentally preferable alternative is the all wilderness alternative. It would cause the least change from the natural environment over the long term. All 4,265 acres of federal land within the Little Wood River WSA are recommended for wilderness designation. Federal lands recommended for wilderness designation within the WSA are shown on the Little Wood River Proposal map.

The WSA has outstanding wilderness values which would benefit from wilderness designation. Both parcels are adjacent to the large Pioneer Mountains RARE II Area (#4-201). The Sawtooth and Challis National Forests have recommended a 95,911 acre portion of the RARE II Area as suitable for wilderness designation. The Little Wood River WSA is a logical extension of the U.S. Forest Service's wilderness recommendation. The suitable wilderness recommendation for the Little Wood River WSA is dependent upon the contiguous suitable recommendation for the Pioneer Mountains RARE II Area. The area recommended for designation could be managed as wilderness in conjunction with a contiguous U.S. Forest Service Wilderness. The WSA's small size would make it difficult to manage as wilderness without the contiguous designation. However, both the U.S. Forest Service's proposed wilderness and the suitable recommendation for this WSA are relatively noncontroversial. Both areas contain minimal resource conflicts.

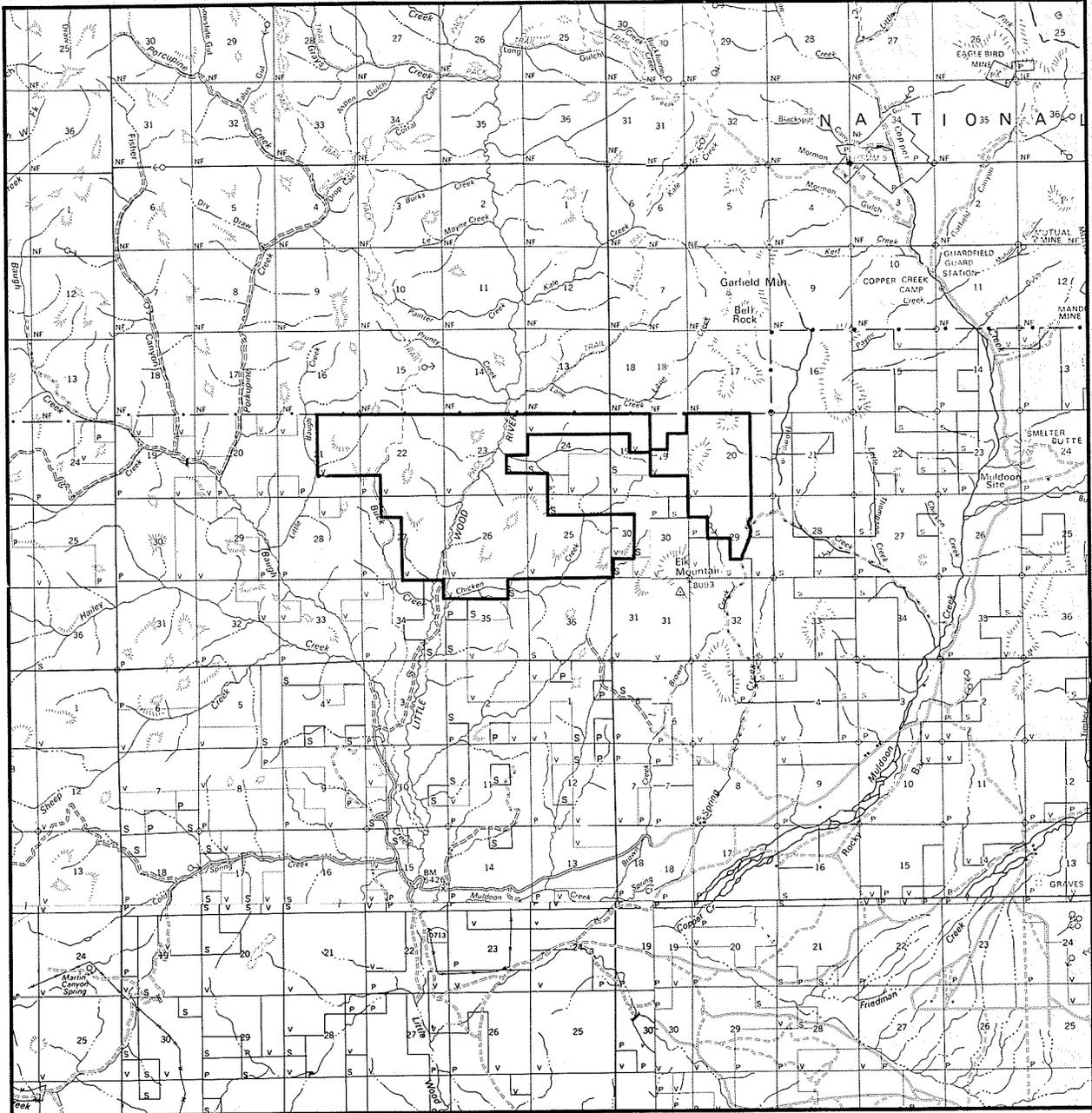
The Little Wood River WSA is generally natural, and most of the area is pristine. The only marks of humans are two constructed trails and several examples of tree carving left by sheepherders over the years. Both of the trails are of a low standard which would be suitable in a designated wilderness. There are a few infrequently used primitive campsites. The only facilities at these campsites are small rock fire rings.

The area has been grazed by livestock since the late 1800s. However, the impact of grazing is not noticeable to most visitors unless they happen upon a band of sheep. With the exception of limited cattle use on the extreme western edge of the WSA, all livestock grazing in the area is by sheep. Most of the sheep use is trailing to and from the national forest in the early summer and late fall. All of the sheep operators in the area use pack stock to move camps and equipment. Several of the south slopes in the WSA appear to be heavily used but this is due to concentrated use by elk during the winter. There are no planned or proposed range improvements inside the WSA and wilderness designation would have no affect on existing sheep operations.

Recreational use of the area is light. Most use is concentrated during the fall hunting season with a majority of the hunters pursuing mule deer. Elk tags are available in small numbers under controlled unit regulations. One outfitter operates in the area under permits from BLM and the U.S. Forest Service. The area is slowly being discovered by hikers and fishermen from nearby Sun Valley and Ketchum. Most of these local users seem to be seeking a reprieve from the similar, but more crowded, opportunities available in the Big Wood River Valley. Opportunities for solitude, primitive and unconfined recreation are exceptional.

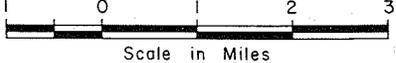
While the overlaying and surrounding ACEC is essential to the long-term survival of a 400-head elk herd, the WSA also supports mule deer, blue grouse, sage grouse, raptors, beaver, black bear, mountain lions, trout and a large variety of nongame wildlife. During the spring it is not unusual to see elk, antelope and mule deer, all at the same time. The WSA is a transitional area (ecotone) between the forest and mountains to the north, and the desert of the Snake River Plain to the south. The Little Wood River flood plain contains an intact, lush cottonwood riparian forest.

The Little Wood River WSA is located directly on top of the dividing line between two Bailey-Kuchler classified ecosystems. Both the Intermountain Sagebrush Province/Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem and the Rocky Mountain Forest Province/Douglas-fir Forest Ecosystem are represented in the National Wilderness Preservation System in Idaho. However, wilderness designation for this WSA provides an opportunity to include a transition zone along with its associated biodiversity in the National Wilderness Preservation System.



R. 19 E. | R. 20 E. | R. 20 E. | R. 21 E.

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



**ID-53-4
LITTLE WOOD RIVER
PROPOSAL**

JANUARY 1989

T. 4 N.
T. 3 N.
T. 3 N.
T. 2 N.

**Table 1 -- Land Status and Acreage Summary of the Study Area
LITTLE WOOD RIVER WSA**

Within Wilderness Study Area

BLM (surface and subsurface)	4,265
Split Estate (BLM surface only)	0
Inholdings (state, private)	0
Total	4,265

Within the Recommended Wilderness Boundary

BLM (within WSA)	4,265
BLM (outside WSA)	0
Split Estate (within WSA)	0
Split Estate (outside WSA)	0
Total BLM Land Recommended for Wilderness	4,265
Inholdings (state, private)	0
State land (outside WSA)	0

Within the Area Not Recommended for Wilderness

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

3. Criteria Considered in Developing the Wilderness Recommendations

Wilderness Characteristics

A. Naturalness

The Little Wood River WSA is natural in appearance. The rugged mountain sides appear unaffected by the works of man. Although livestock grazing has affected the vegetation along the Little Wood River drainage, the canyon's dense riparian vegetation remains natural in appearance.

A closed vehicle trail extends 1,500 feet into the WSA along the Little Wood River from the south boundary. Following the closure in 1982, this trail has revegetated to a single track. At the present time, the two-track jeep trail appears to end at the private land/BLM (WSA) boundary. From that point north, the trail's appearance is that of a low standard pack trail.

B. Solitude

The WSA provides outstanding opportunities for solitude. The WSA's rugged mountainous topography, dense riparian vegetation along the Little Wood River and stands of Douglas-fir and quaking aspen in the higher elevations, combined with the WSA's proximity to the Pioneer Mountains provide numerous opportunities for solitude. Visitors to the area can feel isolated virtually anywhere in the WSA.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

The Little Wood River WSA contains outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation. The area is used by hikers, backpackers, horse packers and hunters. Many visitors pass through the area on their way to the Pioneer Mountains Roadless Area. A diversity of recreational opportunities including fishing, camping, hunting, photography and sightseeing are available within the area.

D. Special Features

The WSA makes up approximately 55 percent of the public lands within the 11,887 acre Elk Mountain Crucial Elk Winter Range ACEC. The ACEC is managed primarily for the long-term protection of winter habitat for elk. This area is essential to the long-term survival of an elk herd of up to 400 animals that summer in the Pioneer Mountains and winter in the ACEC. The area also supports year-round populations of mule deer, blue grouse and sage grouse. Raptors use the cottonwoods in the canyon bottoms for nest sites. The section of the Little Wood River which flows through the WSA is a large-volume, pristine stream. Environmental organizations have mentioned this section of the river as a candidate for wild river designation under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

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 Wood River WSA would add an ecosystem presently represented in Idaho and represented in the NWPS by four designated areas with 76,129 acres. There are eight 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
Rocky Mountain Forest Province				
	<u>NATIONWIDE</u>			
Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem	4	76,129	23	247,843
	<u>IDAHO</u>			
Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem	0	0	8	162,710

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

The Little Wood River 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 Little Wood River WSA would not contribute significantly to balancing the geographic distribution of areas within the NWPS. The U.S. Forest Service-administered Sawtooth Wilderness (217,008 acres), representing similar landforms and a similar ecosystem, is 60 miles to the northwest. The National Park Service-administered Craters of the Moon Wilderness (43,243 acres) is 20 miles to the southeast. Designation of the Little Wood River WSA as wilderness would not help balance the geographic distribution of opportunities to attain diverse wilderness experiences. Rather, designation would expand opportunities in the NWPS currently available only within these two nearby wilderness areas.

Manageability

The Little Wood River WSA can be reasonably managed as wilderness to preserve values now present in the area. There are no conflicts with existing resource uses. Continuation of existing livestock operations would not be impacted by wilderness designation. Sheep grazing is the only current permitted use in the area. There are no facilities in the WSA associated with these sheep operations. Operators use horses and mules to pack in sheep camps. Motorized ATVs are not used because the country is too steep and because travel along the Little Wood River trail requires numerous deep fords.

There are two trails which provide access to the WSA and the Pioneer Mountains Roadless Area to the north. At the present time, the trailheads are located on private land about one mile south of the WSA boundary. The federal government holds easements for both of these trails across the private land. The private landowner requested that his land be included in the existing motorized closure for the surrounding ACEC to prevent motorized use of his property. The gate and signing of the main Little Wood River trail have been successful in preventing motorized use.

All public lands within the WSA were closed to motorized vehicle use on October 1, 1982. The U.S. Forest Service's proposed wilderness to the north is also closed to motorized use. Both of these closures are well established and known by the public. Wilderness designation would not be viewed as a new closure by ORV enthusiasts.

Overall, the manageability of the area is enhanced by the overlaying ACEC classification. Because the ACEC boundary extends beyond the WSA boundary, additional protection is provided along the perimeter of the WSA.

Energy and Minerals Resource Values

The WSA has low oil, gas and geothermal potential and moderate favorability for silver and zinc. (Geology, Energy, Mineral Resource Evaluation of the Pioneer Mountains GRA October 1983.) There are no mining claims within the WSA and few mining claims adjacent to the WSA.

Based on the low leasable mineral potential and lack of locatable mineral activity, there is little potential for mineral development 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-53-4 (LITTLE WOOD RIVER)

Issue Topics	Proposed Action (All Wilderness/No Action)	No Wilderness Alternative
Impact on Wilderness Values	<p>All wilderness values would receive the special legislative protection provided by wilderness designation.</p> <p>Wilderness designation and management would maintain the area's apparent naturalness and outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation.</p> <p>Special features would be maintained.</p>	<p>No surface-disturbing actions are anticipated or predicted in the WSA. The area would continue to be managed as an ACEC.</p> <p>Management of the area as an ACEC for elk crucial winter range would maintain the WSA's naturalness, outstanding opportunities for solitude, and primitive and unconfined recreation and special features.</p>
Impacts on Pioneer Mountains Roadless Area	<p>Wilderness designation of the Little Wood River WSA would help protect and enhance the wilderness values of the Roadless Area by ensuring that no actions would take place in the WSA that would intrude upon them.</p>	<p>The wilderness values of the proposed Pioneer Mountain Wilderness would not be affected.</p>
Impacts on Motorized Recreation	<p>The Little Wood River WSA would remain closed to recreational ORV use. There would be no impact on motorized recreation.</p>	<p>The Little Wood River WSA would remain closed to recreational ORV use. There would be no impact on motorized recreation.</p>
Impacts on Crucial Elk Winter Range	<p>The elk crucial winter range would be protected and maintained.</p>	<p>The area would be managed as an ACEC for the protection of elk crucial winter range.</p>

Local Social and Economic Considerations

Designation of the area as wilderness would have no or minimal effects on the local social and economic situation.

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, Idaho, during February 1988.

During public review of the Draft EIS, 27 letters were received. Fifteen specifically supported wilderness designations, with nine comments supporting a suitable recommendation for the Little Wood River WSA. Six letters supported nonwilderness designation, with two specifically identifying the Little Wood River WSA. None of their comments addressed any objections to the recommendation for this WSA.

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