

Lower Salmon Falls Creek Wilderness Study Area

1. The Study Area -- 3,500 acres

The Lower Salmon Falls Creek WSA (ID-17-10) is located in Twin Falls County approximately 40 miles southwest of Twin Falls, Idaho. The WSA contains 3,500 acres of BLM land (see Table 1). There are no private or state inholdings. Boundaries are the canyon rim on both the east and west sides. The northern boundary is generally the Lilly Grade Road while the southern boundary is on a section line 1.25 miles north of Salmon Falls Dam.

The WSA consists of a 16-mile long and .5-mile wide canyon that carries Salmon Falls Creek. This vertical-walled, meandering canyon dissects the Antelope Pocket lava plain and is between 300 and 600 feet deep. It supports a variety of plants, fish and wildlife species. Elevations range from 3,660 feet along the creek bottom at its northern boundary to just above 5,000 feet on top of the rim near its southern boundary. The talus slopes of the canyon are dominated by northern high desert species while the canyon bottom is dominated by juniper, willow and other riparian vegetation.

The WSA was studied under Section 202 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) and was included in the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for Small Wilderness Study Areas Statewide filed with the Environmental Protection Agency 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

3,500 acres recommended for nonwilderness

The recommendation for the Lower Salmon Falls Creek WSA is to not designate the area as wilderness and to release the 3,500 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 will be implemented in a manner which will use all practical means to avoid or minimize adverse environmental impacts.

The WSA is recommended nonsuitable for wilderness designation because of wilderness characteristics of naturalness, primitive recreation and solitude are not considered to merit inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). Also manageability problems would arise due to the area's small size and narrow configuration and outside influences causing resource protection problems.

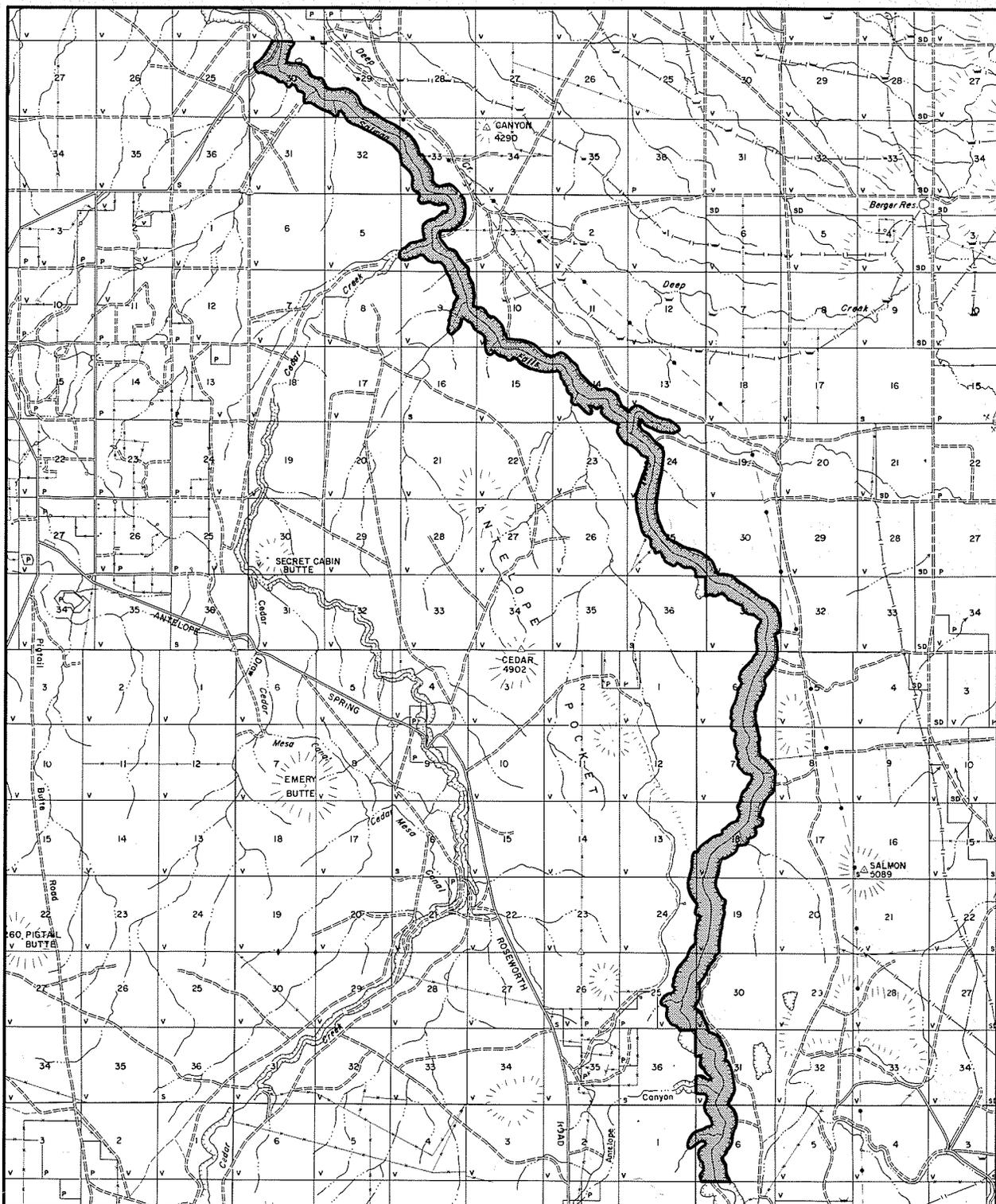
The quality of naturalness is diminished in the WSA by different factors. The limited access routes into the narrow, steep canyon create highly concentrated use areas that are visible and create a perception that these site-specific areas are not natural in character. These areas show signs of overuse, vegetation losses and soil erosion and compaction. Also the water flow through the canyon is controlled by the Salmon River Canal Company which manages the reservoir located two miles upstream from the WSA boundary.

The quality of solitude is also diminished due to the WSA's small size and narrow configuration creating a narrow corridor of use from its limited access routes. That also increases the potential for visitor interaction. Vegetative screening on the side slopes of the canyon is poor and does not screen out sights or sounds of other users. Sights and sounds of activities outside the narrow WSA also diminish the quality of solitude.

The narrow configuration and steep terrain of the WSA has limited the number of access routes to the area's canyon bottom, thereby diminishing the quality of opportunities for unconfined recreation opportunities. The steep terrain of the WSA limits additional access routes into the canyon. More access is needed to provide better opportunities for unconfined camping. Campers would have to use the same site or be within hearing distance of each other.

Management of the area would be difficult due to the WSA's small size, narrow configuration and limited access routes into the canyon. User restrictions would be set up immediately to protect the wilderness and supplemental values within the canyon. In addition, BLM does not have control over the water flow through the WSA. That could cause a risk to visitors and resource protection problems during high water releases and low or no water releases.

The no wilderness recommendation provides the opportunity to continue management of the area and an additional 14 miles of canyon as an Outstanding Natural Area/Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ONA/ACEC). The designation of the area as an ONA/ACEC puts emphasis on the supplemental values rather than the marginal wilderness characteristic values (outstanding natural opportunities for solitude and or primitive recreation).



T. 11 S.
 T. 12 S.
 T. 13 S.
 T. 13 S.
 T. 14 S.

R.13 E. | R.14 E.

R.14 E. | R.15 E.

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



**ID-17-10
 LOWER SALMON FALLS CREEK
 PROPOSAL**

JANUARY 1989

**Table 1 -- Land Status and Acreage Summary of the Study Area
LOWER SALMON FALLS CREEK WSA**

Within Wilderness Study Area

BLM (surface and subsurface)	3,500
Split Estate (BLM surface only)	0
Inholdings (state, private)	0
Total	3,500

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	3,500
Split Estate	0
Total BLM Land Not Recommended for Wilderness	3,500
Inholdings (state, private)	0

3. Criteria Considered in Developing the Wilderness Recommendations

Wilderness Characteristics

A. Naturalness

The Lower Salmon Falls Creek WSA is essentially natural with limited human imprints. The impacts on naturalness of the area consist of illegal garbage/litter dumps located just below the rim on the north end of the WSA. There is also an abandoned two-track way (now used as a foot trail) located on the southwest end of the WSA that travels north along a wide bench area just below the upper rim of the canyon for one-half mile inside the WSA. The few trails that do go down into the canyon are mostly undeveloped and are located in the canyon's steep draws. These trails all show some type of soil and vegetative losses due to their steepness and lack of design. Also the few indiscriminately located campsites along the creek show signs of minor vegetative losses and soil compaction problems.

The narrowness of the canyon and its limited access routes to the bottom tends to funnel user groups into the same area creating visible, highly concentrated use areas. This creates a perception that these site-specific areas are not natural in character.

Also the visitor use in the canyon has increased by 23 percent over the last two years from 3,000 to 3,700 visits creating an impact on some of the more easily accessed trails and campsites from points outside the WSA.

B. Solitude

The topographic screening afforded by the meandering character of the canyon, combined with good-to-excellent vegetative screening in the canyon bottom, offers some opportunities for solitude. However, the quality of solitude is diminished due to the narrow corridor of use and limited access routes into the canyon which increases the potential for visitor interaction. Vegetative screening on the sideslopes of the canyon is poor and does not screen out sights or sounds of visitors using different trails leading to the canyon bottom. In some canyon areas, sounds can be heard for more than a mile in both directions and users can see others as far as two miles away.

Solitude along the rim is diminished by the sights and sounds of human activities and developments on the flat lava plain located just outside the WSA boundary. These activities and developments include dry and irrigated farming, livestock grazing, range developments and power line corridors. On the rim at the southern and northern ends of the WSA, vehicle traffic noise can be heard from the steep road grades at Salmon Dam and Lilly Grade.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

Opportunities for primitive recreation consist of upland and waterfowl hunting, fishing, camping, backpacking, hiking, sightseeing and nature photography. Access routes into the canyon consist of very few undeveloped trails or passages into the canyon. Trail use is basically found near the vehicle access routes paralleling the rim or near the two ends of the Lower Salmon Falls Creek WSA where major roads are less than 1.5 miles away. The quality of unconfined recreation is diminished by the small number of access routes which tends to concentrate visitors in a narrow corridor.

The steep terrain of the WSA limits the location and number of additional access routes into the canyon to provide better opportunities for unconfined and primitive recreation activities.

Both the primitive and unconfined recreation opportunities are diminished due to the limited number of campsites in the steep canyon, which causes groups to camp at the same site or within hearing distance of others.

D. Special Features

No special features that would attract a large number of visitors to the area are found in the WSA.

Diversity in the National Wilderness Preservation System

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

Wilderness designation of the Lower Salmon Falls Creek WSA would not add a new ecosystem to the NWPS; however, it would add a vegetation and landform not presently represented in the Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem. This ecosystem is represented by three designated areas with 76,699 acres. There are 35 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
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 Lower Salmon Falls Creek 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 Lower Salmon Falls Creek WSA would not contribute significantly to balancing the geographic distribution of areas within the NWPS. Regionally, the WSA would add a desert canyon system not found in designated wilderness and would help to balance opportunities to attain diverse wilderness experiences.

Manageability

The Lower Salmon Falls Creek WSA could be managed to preserve its wilderness character in the long term. However, management would be extremely difficult because of the area's small size and narrow configuration creating problems in resource protection, both human and environmental.

With limited access points and routes into the canyon, user restrictions into the canyon would be set up immediately to protect the wilderness values from visitor saturation that could diminish the naturalness, solitude, recreation and supplemental values.

Overall wilderness expenditures would be extremely high due to hiring of personnel to enforce visitor use limitations, repair resource damage, construct new trails and protect supplemental values in the WSA.

In addition, because the Bureau does not have control over the release of water from the upstream reservoir, visitor safety and resource protection would be a problem during high water releases. Preserving the canyon bottom's natural ecosystem from too little or no water releases would also be a problem.

Energy and Minerals Resource Values

A Geologic, Energy and Mineral (GEM) assessment report was prepared for the WSA in 1982 and 1983 (TERRADATA Corporation 1983). Conclusions from the report are:

The WSA has only low favorability for diatomite resources. The area is not favorable for any other GEM resources. This includes oil and gas, geothermal, metallic metals, oil shale and tar sands, uranium and thorium, coal and other metals.

Currently there are four oil and gas leases within the WSA boundary with two of the leases covering approximately 500 acres. At this time, the lessees are restricted from surface occupancy between canyon rims. Exploration may be conducted using what equipment can be carried in on foot or horseback.

The WSA is not within an area of current locatable mineral activity and there are no existing mining claims within the area.

There are no hydroelectric plants nor power lines that cross inside the WSA. Power lines exist that parallel the canyon rim or cross less than a mile just north and south of the north and south WSA boundaries. Interest for future hydroelectric development has been concentrated north of Lilly Grade and near Salmon Falls Dam, both areas outside 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-17-10 (LOWER SALMON FALLS CREEK)

RESOURCE TOPIC	PROPOSED ACTION (NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE)	ALL WILDERNESS ALTERNATIVE
Impacts on Wilderness Values	No Impact.	No impact.
Impacts on Hydroelectric Development	No Impact.	No Impact.
Impacts on Oil and Gas Development	No Impact.	Opportunity to explore in the canyon would be foregone. No impact on development.
Impacts on Cultural Resources	No Impact.	No Impact.
Impacts on Bighorn Sheep Introduction	No Impact.	No Impact.
Impacts on Motorized Recreation	No Impact.	No Impact.

Local Social and Economic Considerations

Designation of 3,500 acres of the Lower Salmon Falls Creek WSA as wilderness would have no impact on the local social or economic values. There are no social or economic issues identified with the study of this WSA.

Summary of WSA-Specific Public Comments

Public involvement has occurred throughout the wilderness review process. Certain comments received during the inventory process and early stages of the EIS preparation were used to develop significant study issues and various alternatives for the ultimate management of those lands found to have wilderness values.

During the formal review of the Draft inventory recommendation, public comment overwhelmingly supported inclusion of the inventory area as a WSA even though it did not meet the size criteria for wilderness. Supporting comments noted the area's special features and outstanding opportunities for solitude and unconfined recreation. At that time, the Twin Falls County Board of County Commissioners and Planning and Zoning Commission recommended to continue the Outstanding Natural Area (ONA) designation for the area.

During the formal review of the Draft EIS, 41 written and oral comments were received. Of the 20 comments which specifically mentioned the Lower Salmon Falls Creek WSA, 16 supported wilderness, two opposed designation and two took no stand. Those favoring wilderness commented on its solitude and supplemental values. Those opposing designation felt that the ONA/ACEC designation protects the area's unique values. Most comments were from residents of Idaho.

Federal agencies commented on the Draft EIS included the Bureau of Reclamation, Bureau of Indian Affairs and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Idaho State agencies providing comments were the Department of Health and Welfare and the Historical Society. The agencies took no position on wilderness designation.