

# Snowhole Rapids Wilderness Study Area

## 1. The Study Area -- 5,068 acres

The Snowhole Rapids WSA (ID-62-1) is located in Idaho and Lewis Counties eight miles southwest of Cottonwood, Idaho. The WSA contains 5,068 acres.

Private land forms the border around the majority of the WSA. Approximately 2.5 miles of Rice Creek Road and Cottonwood Creek Road (natural surface roads) form small portions of the border at both ends of the WSA. The WSA is approximately 20 miles in length but averages only .5 mile in width. Within this configuration is the Salmon River and its steep canyon walls. The majority of the WSA is between those walls. Only at Mahoney Creek, approximately midway through the area, does the WSA extend any appreciable distance from the river. There the boundary extends one mile south of the river. In contrast, the WSA narrows to approximately 330 feet 1.5 miles downstream.

The canyon walls within the WSA are steep and highly broken due to erosion. Numerous perennial and intermittent drainages further diversify the terrain. Elevation ranges from 1,200 feet at the Salmon River to 3,800 feet in the Mahoney Creek drainage.

The vegetation within the WSA is more uniform than the topography. Grasses dominate the landscape where adequate soil is present. However, scattered locations support trees, shrubs and herbaceous species. Most of these locations are along the drainages that flow into the Salmon River. The most extensively vegetated area is found in the Mahoney Creek drainage.

The WSA was studied under Section 603 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) and was included in the North Idaho Management Framework Plan Amendment/Environmental Impact Statement filed in September 1986. Two alternatives were analyzed in the EIS: an all wilderness alternative; and a no action/no wilderness alternative, which is the recommendation in this report.

## **2. Recommendation and Rationale**

**0 acres recommended for wilderness**

**5,068 acres recommended for nonwilderness**

The recommendation for the Snowhole Rapids WSA is to not designate the area as wilderness and release the area 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 5,068 acres of federal land within the WSA are recommended for nonwilderness designation as shown on the Snowhole Rapids Proposal map.

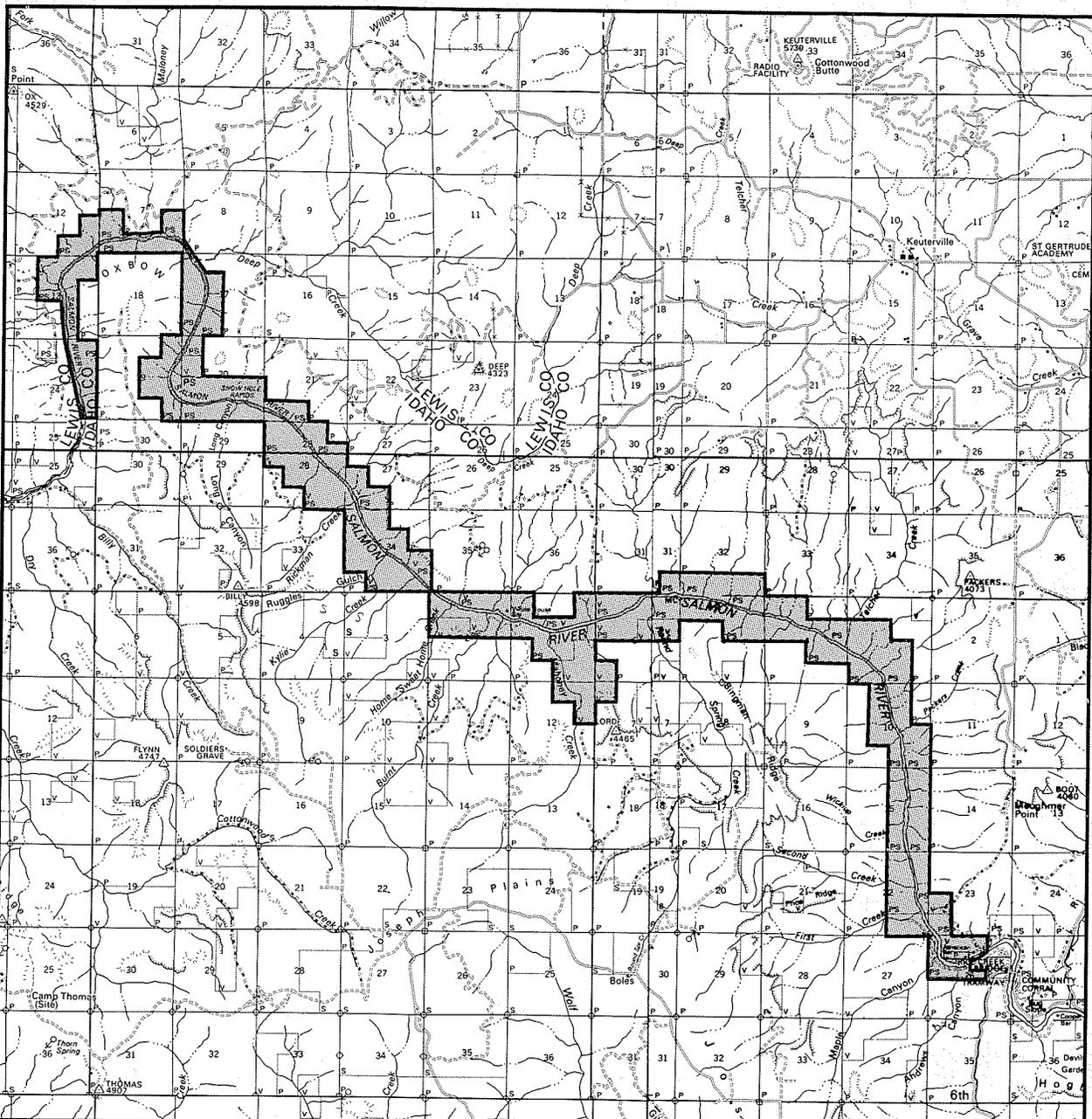
This WSA is not recommended for wilderness designation because long-term management of this WSA as wilderness would not be feasible. This conclusion is based on two major factors:

Increasing homesite development and ranching activity on adjacent non-BLM lands is visible from the river and many other points in the WSA and reduces user perceptions of naturalness and solitude. These visual intrusions will increase over the long term.

The river corridor has a high value for management as a recreation area. The management objective is to promote recreation opportunities in this area. Since 1975, use of the Salmon River by recreationists has increased from 2,800 annual user days to over 8,500 annual user days. This trend is continuing and will reduce opportunities for solitude since almost all the use of this WSA is concentrated in the narrow river corridor, which averages about one-half mile in width, where topographic and vegetative screening is insufficient to isolate users from one another. The physical characteristics of this WSA are such that indirect or direct management techniques designed to disperse visitor use and minimize user encounters would not be practical. This is compounded by the concentration of visitor use along the river, unmanaged segments of the river both upstream and downstream of the WSA and the nonconforming allowable use of power boats, all of which degrade opportunities for solitude.

The unique natural values of this WSA would be protected through the continuing implementation of the Lower Salmon River Recreation Management Plan and the Lower Salmon River Cultural Resource Management Plan. The WSA is withdrawn from all forms of appropriation under the mining laws by a formal withdrawal enacted in 1986. As such, there will be no impacts from mineral exploration or development. Under the recommendation, the entire WSA would be open to ORV use. No land-based ORV use occurs presently and it is unlikely to occur in the near future simply due to the rugged topographic features of the Salmon River Canyon within the WSA. Livestock use would be maintained at the current level of 299 AUMs.

The recreational values of this WSA are outstanding. The Lower Salmon River, 21 miles of which pass through this WSA, provides nationally recognized whitewater rafting opportunities. Based upon the percentage of the WSA area to the total river corridor, recreation use within the WSA is currently estimated at 8,500 annual user days. Recreation activities associated with river running include fishing, camping, hiking, hunting and sightseeing. The recommendation will protect and enhance the recreational values of this WSA and accommodate increased use.



T. 31 N.

T. 31 N.

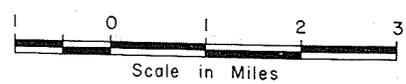
T. 30 N.

T. 30 N.

R. 3 W. | R. 2 W.

R. 2 W. | R. 1 W.

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



**ID-62-1  
SNOWHOLE RAPIDS  
PROPOSAL**

JANUARY 1988

**Table 1 -- Land Status and Acreage Summary of the Study Area  
SNOWHOLE RAPIDS**

**Within Wilderness Study Area**

BLM (surface and subsurface)	5,068
Split Estate (BLM surface only)	0
Inholdings (state, private)	0
 Total	 5,068

**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	5,068
Split Estate	0
 Total BLM Land Not Recommended for Wilderness	 5,068
 Inholdings (state, private)	 0

### **3. Criteria Considered in Developing the Wilderness Recommendations**

#### **Wilderness Characteristics**

##### **A. Naturalness**

The quality of the wilderness values was the key consideration in the recommendation. While the Snowhole Rapids WSA contained the wilderness values necessary for study, they are not considered to merit inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. The WSA generally appears natural but there are several site-specific human signs, primarily rangeland developments, which impact naturalness locally. Evidence of human activity is present throughout the WSA, largely from mining and domestic livestock grazing.

Within the WSA, there are no concentrations of impacts which could impair the feeling of being in a natural environment. Whitehouse Bar contains most of the impacts within the WSA. Several old cabins are along both sides of the river. An old road, suitable only as a pack trail, extends down the river on the south bank.

Other intrusions within the WSA are widely scattered, small tailing piles and small rock structures. They are the result of Chinese mining activity between 1860 and 1880.

Visitor use is centered on the river and its banks. Infrequent use occurs beyond this narrow corridor. From certain locations along the river, outside impacts along the rim of the canyon can be seen. Activities on land adjacent to the WSA have had little affect on users within the area. However, increases in activity on adjacent lands could adversely impact user perceptions of naturalness within the WSA.

##### **B. Solitude**

Primary use of the WSA is recreational activity centered on power and float boating on the Salmon River. The river banks, where suitable, are only used for campsites or for short stops. Since visitor use is generally limited to a narrow corridor, chances for encountering other users are increasing as recreational use of this area grows.

The outstanding opportunity for solitude can be maintained only under conditions of low and evenly distributed use. Use on the lower Salmon River has more than tripled within the past five years and a continuation of this trend will result in diminished opportunities for solitude.

##### **C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation**

The Salmon River is widely recognized as an outstanding whitewater rafting river. Activities associated with river rafting may include fishing, sightseeing and hiking.

#### **D. Special Features**

The Salmon River Canyon is of great archaeological and historical importance. Numerous archaeological sites have been located throughout the Snowhole Rapids WSA. Artifacts indicate continuous habitation by humans for over 10,000 years. The entire river corridor within this WSA has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places and is known as the Lower Salmon River Archaeological District.

## Diversity in the National Wilderness Preservation System

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

Wilderness designation of the Snowhole Raipds WSA would not add a new ecosystem to the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). This ecosystem is represented by two designated areas with 55,925 acres. There is one other BLM study area 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
Palouse Grassland Province				
<u>NATIONWIDE</u>				
Wheatgrass-Bluegrass Ecosystem	2	55,925	1	5,068
<u>IDAHO</u>				
Wheatgrass-Bluegrass Ecosystem	0	0	1	5,068

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

The Snowhole Rapids 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 five hours of the population center.

**Table 3**

**Wilderness Opportunities for Residents  
of Major Population Centers**

<b>Population Centers</b>	<b><u>NWPS Areas</u></b>		<b><u>Other BLM Studies</u></b>	
	<b>areas</b>	<b>acres</b>	<b>areas</b>	<b>acres</b>
Boise, Idaho	16	4,741,570	141	5,374,250

## **C. Balancing the Geographic Distribution of Wilderness Areas**

Inclusion of the Snowhole Rapids WSA would not contribute to balancing the geographic distribution of areas within the NWPS. The Northern Rocky Mountain region contains one of the largest concentrations of designated and proposed wilderness areas within the country.

### **Manageability**

Long-term management of this WSA as wilderness would not be feasible. Increased homesite development and ranching on adjacent non-BLM lands would reduce opportunities for primitive recreation and perceptions of naturalness in this area. Opportunities for solitude are being reduced significantly due to the increased use of the Salmon River.

Techniques to minimize visitor encounters and interaction would not be practical for this WSA for a number of reasons:

The river canyon configuration of this WSA concentrates users in a narrow corridor. Use of this WSA is centered on one major activity (boating and rafting). Topographic and vegetative screening is insufficient in the high-use corridor. Use of this navigable river is basically unmanaged both upstream and downstream of the WSA. Power boat use of the river is an established nonconforming use that intrudes upon opportunities for solitude.

### **Energy and Minerals Resource Values**

According to the internal BLM analysis and the joint U.S. Geological Survey/Bureau of Mines initial assessment, no significant energy or mineral values exist in this WSA. There are no mining claims, leases or pending applications for leasable minerals.

This WSA is currently withdrawn from all forms of appropriation under the mining laws by a formal withdrawal enacted in 1986.

### **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-62-1 (SNOWHOLE RAPIDS)**

ISSUE TOPICS	ALL WILDERNESS ALTERNATIVE	PROPOSED ACTION (NO WILDERNESS/NO ACTION)
Impacts on Wilderness Values	Solitude would continue to be degraded by power boat use.	Solitude degraded by power boat use.
Impacts on Development of Mineral Resources	Continued withdrawal of 5,068 acres.	Continued withdrawal of 5,068 acres.
Impacts on Timber Industry and Local Economy: Potential Harvest (MBF) Potential Jobs	Topic was not an issue for this alternative.	Topic was not an issue for this alternative.
Impacts on Recreational ORV Use	No impact.	No impact.
Impacts on Soil: Loss (tons/10 years) Loss (% of current BLM-EIS area totals)	Topic was not an issue for this alternative.	Topic was not an issue for this alternative.
Impacts on Water Quality: Sediment Yield Increase (tons/10 years) Sediment Yield Increase (% of current yields in EIS area) Water Yield Increase (acre/ft/year)	Topic was not an issue for this alternative.	Topic was not an issue for this alternative.
Impacts on Water Supply	Topic was not an issue for this alternative.	Topic was not an issue for this alternative.
Impacts on Fish: Sediment Reaching Fish Habitat (tons/10 years)	Topic was not an issue for this alternative.	Topic was not an issue for this alternative.
Impacts on Vegetation: Eliminate Productivity (acres/10 years) Modification of Succession (acres/10 years)	Topic was not an issue for this alternative.	Topic was not an issue for this alternative.
Impacts on Mammals and Birds: Loss of Habitat Capability (head/10 years) Elk Deer	Topic was not an issue for this alternative.	Topic was not an issue for this alternative.
Impacts on Archaeological Resources	Topic was not an issue for this alternative.	Topic was not an issue for this alternative.
Impacts on Scenic Quality	Topic was not an issue for this alternative.	Topic was not an issue for this alternative.

## **Local Social and Economic Considerations**

Neither of the alternatives considered for the Snowhole Rapids WSA would cause any significant social or economic effects.

## **Summary of WSA-Specific Public Comments**

Public involvement has occurred throughout the wilderness review process starting with the inventory phase and continuing through the development of the Final EIS.

During the inventory phase, the majority of commenters cited the recreational and archaeological values of the Lower Salmon River corridor. Many asked that BLM support efforts to have the river designated as a wild and scenic river rather than a wilderness area.

Of the 31 respondents who specifically commented on this WSA during the EIS phase (either in writing or orally), 19 favor wilderness designation while 12 prefer no wilderness for this area. Six commenters oppose any further wilderness designations regardless of the area.

The Idaho Department of Fish and Game submitted a letter supporting the recommendation for this WSA. No other government agencies commented specifically about this WSA. The Nez Perce Indian Tribe commented that it had all rights to the waters of the Salmon River and that this WSA should be returned to its control. No one commented on this WSA at the formal public hearing.