

Proposed Action for the Blue River and KP Creek Wild and Scenic Rivers Suitability Study

Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest, Alpine and Clifton Ranger Districts
Apache and Greenlee Counties

Introduction

The Forest Service is proposing to conduct a suitability study to determine whether the eligible segments of the Blue River and KP Creek should be recommended to Congress for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. These rivers were identified for study by the Forest Service as directed in Section 5(d)(1) of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The suitability study complies with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 as well as policy detailed in Forest Service Handbook 1909.12 Chapter 80, “Wild and Scenic River Evaluation.”

Background

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968 was passed with the intent to preserve some of our nation’s free-flowing rivers and immediate environs for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations. Various land management agencies have since inventoried potentially eligible rivers across the United States.

There are several steps required to determine whether a river system should be recommended for designation under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Determinations are made regarding a river’s eligibility, classification and suitability. Eligibility and classification represent an inventory of existing conditions. Eligibility is an evaluation of whether a river is free-flowing and possesses one or more outstandingly remarkable values. River-related values identified in Section 1(b) of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural, or other similar values) are evaluated by an interdisciplinary team of resource specialists to determine if any are unique, rare, or exemplary in the region of comparison and, therefore, outstandingly remarkable. The determination that a river area contains outstanding values is a professional judgment on the part of the interdisciplinary team, based on objective, scientific analysis.

Eligible segments include a corridor of land encompassing one-quarter mile on both sides of the stream. These segments are then analyzed to determine recommended classifications – either as wild, scenic, or recreational -- based on the existing attributes of the river and adjacent land. Classification is an inventory based on existing development -- specifically, water resources projects, shoreline development, accessibility, and water quality.

Finally, rivers found to be eligible with recommended classifications are studied for suitability. A suitability study provides the basis for determining which rivers to recommend to Congress as potential additions to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System (see Proposed Action below).

In 1993, the Forest Service evaluated the eligibility of river segments in the National Forests of Arizona, including Blue River and its tributary KP Creek in the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests. Segments of both waterways were found to be eligible for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. The Forest is currently refreshing eligibility information to reflect conditions today in preparation for revision of the Forest Plan. This most contemporary information is summarized below and in Table 1.

The suitability of Blue River is being considered at this time due to a proposal to construct a channel-spanning fish barrier in segment 2, located in the Clifton Ranger District. Forest staff conducted an analysis of its potential effects on Blue River's free-flowing condition and found it would affect the free-flowing character because it would modify the waterway. This study will evaluate whether some or all of the eligible segments are suitable additions to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System or whether the barrier, or other uses inconsistent with the intent of the Act as reflected in agency policy, are more important.

Location and Eligibility of the Blue River

Blue River originates south of Alpine, Arizona, near Middle Mountain. It flows southwesterly for approximately 17 miles to the confluence with Dry Blue Creek in New Mexico and then flows southerly about 43 miles to the confluence with the San Francisco River (see Map 2).

Blue River is a perennial watercourse with a greatly varied flow rate, depending on winter and summer rains, and the snow pack from higher elevations. The average river depth is 6 to 24 inches with the width varying from 15 to 50 feet. The average flow is 51 cubic feet per second (CFS). Flooding is common during spring run-off and summer monsoons and can turn the quiet river into a raging torrent. There are several minor diversions on private lands.

Four segments totaling about 53 miles are identified as eligible for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River System. The classifications include two wild segments, one scenic segment, and one recreational segment. The outstandingly remarkable values are scenery, recreation, fish, wildlife, historic, prehistoric, and vegetation (see Table 1).

Location and Eligibility of KP Creek

KP Creek originates near the Mogollon Rim and near U.S. Highway 191. It flows easterly for about 13 miles to the Blue River (see Map 3). There are no dams or diversions. The State of Arizona has classified the entire creek segment as "unique water" because of its high water quality.

The scenery is widely diverse. Upper KP Creek rushes down a steep, thickly forested canyon with lush riparian vegetation and tumbling waterfalls, some seen from KP Trail, which follows the creek. Additional waterfalls are found about 7 miles downstream but these are located off the trail. Grassy flats contrast with large, old-growth ponderosa pines and the trail provides views of deep pools and canyon walls.

About 11 miles are identified as eligible with a classification of wild. This eligible segment has outstandingly remarkable values of scenery, recreation, fish, and wildlife (see Table 1).

Forest Plan Direction

The Apache-Sitgreaves Forest Plan (1987) guides the management of the lands surrounding and including the Blue River and KP Creek. Thirteen miles of the Blue River are in the Blue Range Primitive Area and are managed as wilderness, with no timber harvesting and road construction

allowed in the river corridor (one-quarter mile on each side of the stream). Activities within this area must minimize impact to the wilderness character. The remaining 17 miles of the river are not in a special designation but are closed to motorized vehicle use. The Blue River is adjacent to Centerfire, Nolan, and Pipestem Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRAs), and within and adjacent to Lower San Francisco IRA. The Forest Plan directed that the river be studied from “the main stem of the Blue River from its confluence with the San Francisco River upstream to its confluence with McKittrick Creek in the Blue Range Primitive Area as a candidate stream for eligibility in the Wild and Scenic River System....Also, consistent with any outstanding rights, dams, diversions, or other water resource developments are also prohibited until the study is completed” (Forest Plan, p. 30).

KP Creek lies primarily within the Blue Range Primitive Area and is managed as wilderness. A portion of the creek also flows through lands that were identified in the 1987 Forest Plan as potential additions to the Blue Range Primitive Area.

Blue River and KP Creek support riparian-dependent resources requiring first priority emphasis when considering implementing any management activities (Forest Plan, p. 121). Table 1 lists the eligible segments to be studied. See Maps 1 and 2 for river segments.

Table 1. Eligible segments of Blue River and KP Creek¹

River	Eligible Segment	Classification	Length (miles)	Location	Outstandingly Remarkable Values
Blue River	1	Recreational	25.1	Blue River from the confluence of Campbell Blue and Dry Blue Creeks downstream through the Smith Place to Bear Creek.	Scenery Recreation Fish Wildlife Historic Prehistoric Vegetation
Blue River	2	Wild	16.0	From Bear Creek downstream to ¼ mile above the Blue River Trailhead.	
Blue River	3	Scenic	4.2	From ¼ mile above the Blue River Trailhead to ½ mile below Forest Road 475.	
Blue River	4	Wild	8.1	From ½ mile below Forest Road 475 to the confluence with the San Francisco River.	
KP Creek	1	Wild	11.3	KP Creek originates near the Mogollon Rim close to U.S. Highway 191. From its origin it flows generally east and southeast for approximately 13 miles to the Blue River.	Scenery Recreation Fish Wildlife

¹ Based on 2008 data in project file

Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose and need for this study is to determine if the eligible portions of the Blue River and KP Creek should be recommended to Congress for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River System.

Proposed Action

The proposed action is to determine which, if any, of the Blue River and KP Creek segments are suitable for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. Determinations are made by conducting a suitability study, which is designed to answer these questions:

- 1) Should the river's free-flowing character, water quality, and outstandingly remarkable values be protected, or are one or more other uses important enough to warrant doing otherwise?
- 2) Will the river's free-flowing character, water quality, and outstandingly remarkable values be protected through designation? Is designation the best method for protecting the river corridor? In answering these questions, the benefits and impacts of wild and scenic river designation will be evaluated and alternative protection methods considered.
- 3) Is there a demonstrated commitment to protect the river by any nonfederal entities that may be partially responsible for implementing protective management?

Suitability Factors

Factors to be considered in this study will include those identified in Sections 4(a) and 5(c) of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, provided in the Forest Service Handbook (FSH 1909.12 Ch. 82.41), as well as other factors that may be relevant to the Blue River and KP Creek corridors.

1. Characteristics that do or do not make the area a worthy addition to the National System. These characteristics are described in the Act (paragraphs 2 through 7) and may include additional suitability factors in paragraphs 8 through 13.
2. The status of land ownership and use in the area.
3. The reasonably foreseeable potential uses of the land and water that would be enhanced, foreclosed, or curtailed if the area were included in the National System.
4. The federal agency that will administer the area should it be added to the National System.
5. The extent to which the agency proposes that administration of the river, including the costs thereof, be shared by state and local agencies.
6. The estimated cost to the United States of acquiring necessary lands and interests in land and of administering the area should it be added to the National System.
7. A determination of the degree to which the state or its political subdivisions might participate in the preservation and administration of the river should it be proposed for inclusion in the National System.

These suitability factors will shape the analysis of each river segment and will be used to identify and evaluate the trade-offs between designation under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and other important uses of the rivers and river corridors.

Possible Alternatives

The study will consider alternatives designed to address any issues raised during the analysis. Issues may come from the public or the interdisciplinary team, and will be identified after this public comment period. Based on public comments, issues received, and National Environmental

Policy Act requirements, a range of alternatives will be considered. These alternatives could include:

1. No action (continuation of current management);
2. Recommend national designation of all eligible segments of the river;
3. Protection of eligible segments by means other than national designation;
4. Recommend designation of some, but not all, eligible segments; and
5. Recommend designation of some, but not all, of an eligible segment.

Nature of the Decision to be Made

The environmental analysis will consider issues and alternatives raised by the public and by the Forest Service interdisciplinary team, and disclose the effects of the alternatives. Based on this analysis, the responsible official will answer the following questions:

1. Which, if any, of the eligible river segments under consideration are suitable and should be recommended to the Congress of the United States for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System?
2. If river segments are not recommended for inclusion, how will values be protected?
3. Would there be any significant environmental impact to warrant further analysis in an environmental impact statement?
4. Is a Forest Plan amendment required?

Public Involvement

Public participation is an integral part of this environmental analysis. The Forest Service is seeking information and comments from individuals, as well as from Federal, State, and local agencies, Tribes, and organizations that may be interested in or affected by this suitability study. We are soliciting your comments to help define key issues associated with the suitability study, to develop alternatives, and to refine the analysis of effects.

Comments about suitability factors (as listed above or suggestions for additional factors to consider), potential alternatives to analyze, and other related specific comments would be helpful.

There will be another opportunity to comment when the preliminary environmental assessment (EA) is ready for review this spring. The results of public comments and the analysis of effects will be documented in a final EA.

How to Comment

In order for your comments to be considered in the next stage of analysis, they should be received by **February 16, 2009** and submitted in one of the following ways:

By Mail: Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests
Blue River/KP Creek Suitability Study
c/o Deb Bumpus, Ecosystem Staff Officer
P.O. Box 640
Springerville, AZ 85938

By FAX: (928)-333-5966, ATTN: Blue River/KP Creek Suitability Study c/o Deb Bumpus,
Ecosystem Staff Officer

By Email: comments-southwestern-apache-sitgreaves@fs.fed.us

Oral Comments: Oral comments must be received in person at the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests Headquarters or via telephone (928) 333-4301 (TTY: 928 333-6292), during normal business hours (8:00 am – 4:30 pm).

Please include the following information with your comments:

- Your name, address and telephone number.
- The analysis you are commenting on (Blue River/KP Creek Suitability Study)
- Specific comments about the suitability study, along with supporting information you believe will help identify issues, develop alternatives, or predict environmental effects.

Please be aware that your name, address and comments will become part of the public record and may be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, those who submit anonymous comments will not have standing to appeal the subsequent decision.

Responsible Official and More Information

The Responsible Official for this suitability study is Mr. Chris Knopp, Forest Supervisor for the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests. For more information, please contact Deb Bumpus, Ecosystem Staff Officer at 928-333-6302 or dbumpus@fs.fed.us.

CHRIS KNOPP
Forest Supervisor

Date

Blue River and KP Creek
Wild and Scenic River Suitability Study -- Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests

Let us know if you want to stay informed about this project.
Please return by February 16, 2009

A. To remain on the mailing list for this project, you must:

1) **Submit comments about the proposal according to the directions in the “How to Comment” section in the scoping letter.**

OR

2) **Return this form to the address noted in the scoping letter.**

OR

3) **Contact us via email or phone as noted in the scoping letter.**

B. Receiving Project Information by Mail

Check the notices you want to receive in the mail (you can request the full documents at any time):

_____A letter that the preliminary environmental assessment is available for review

_____A letter summarizing the final decision

OR

Choose to receive the full documents in the mail:

_____Preliminary environmental assessment (100+ pages)

_____Final environmental assessment (100+ pages)

_____Final decision notice (30+ pages)

Please print clearly or affix a return address label:

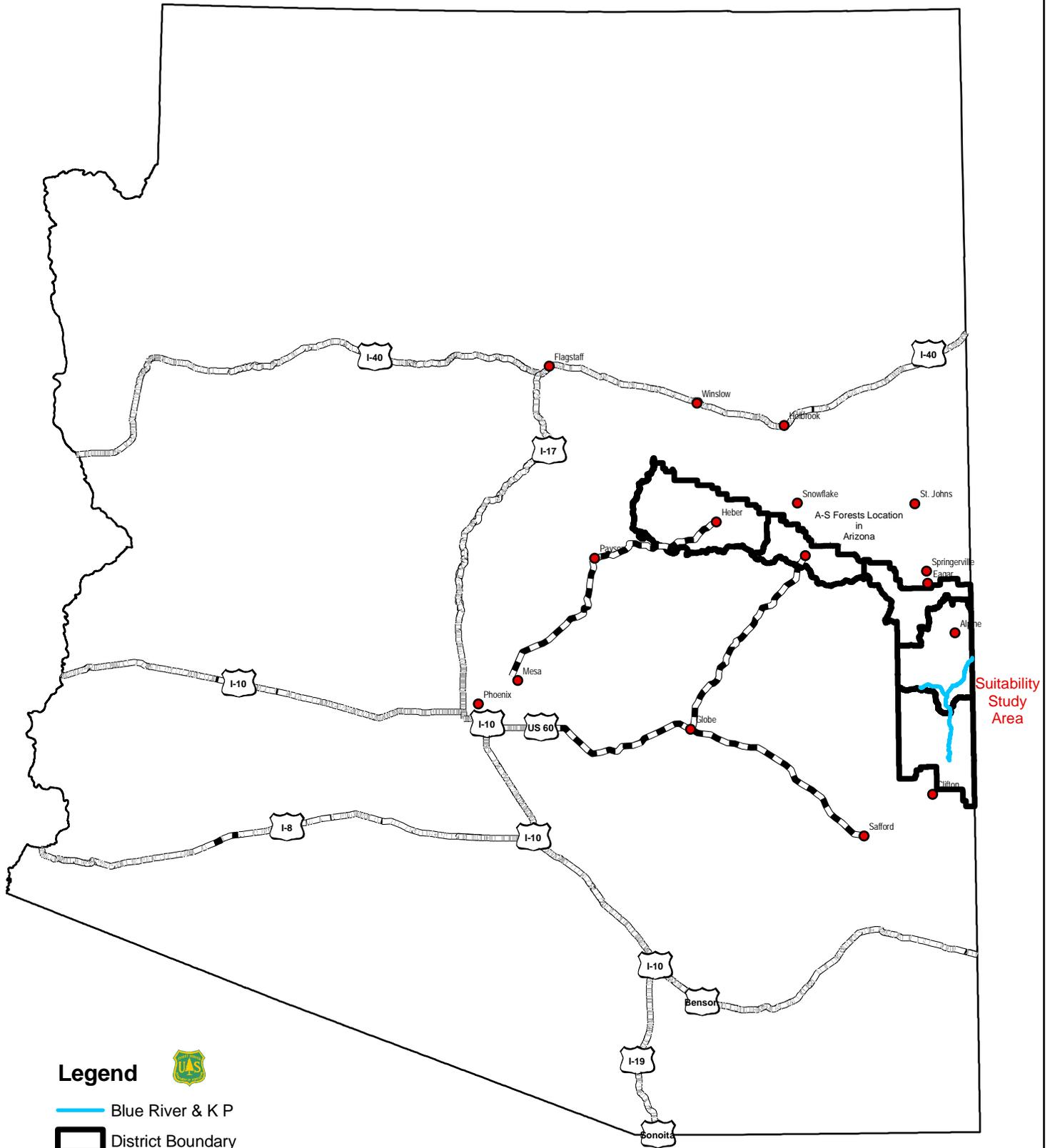
Name _____

Address _____

Choosing to be removed from the mailing list for this project WILL NOT remove you from the master mailing list for future projects.

Arizona Locational Map

Map
1



Legend



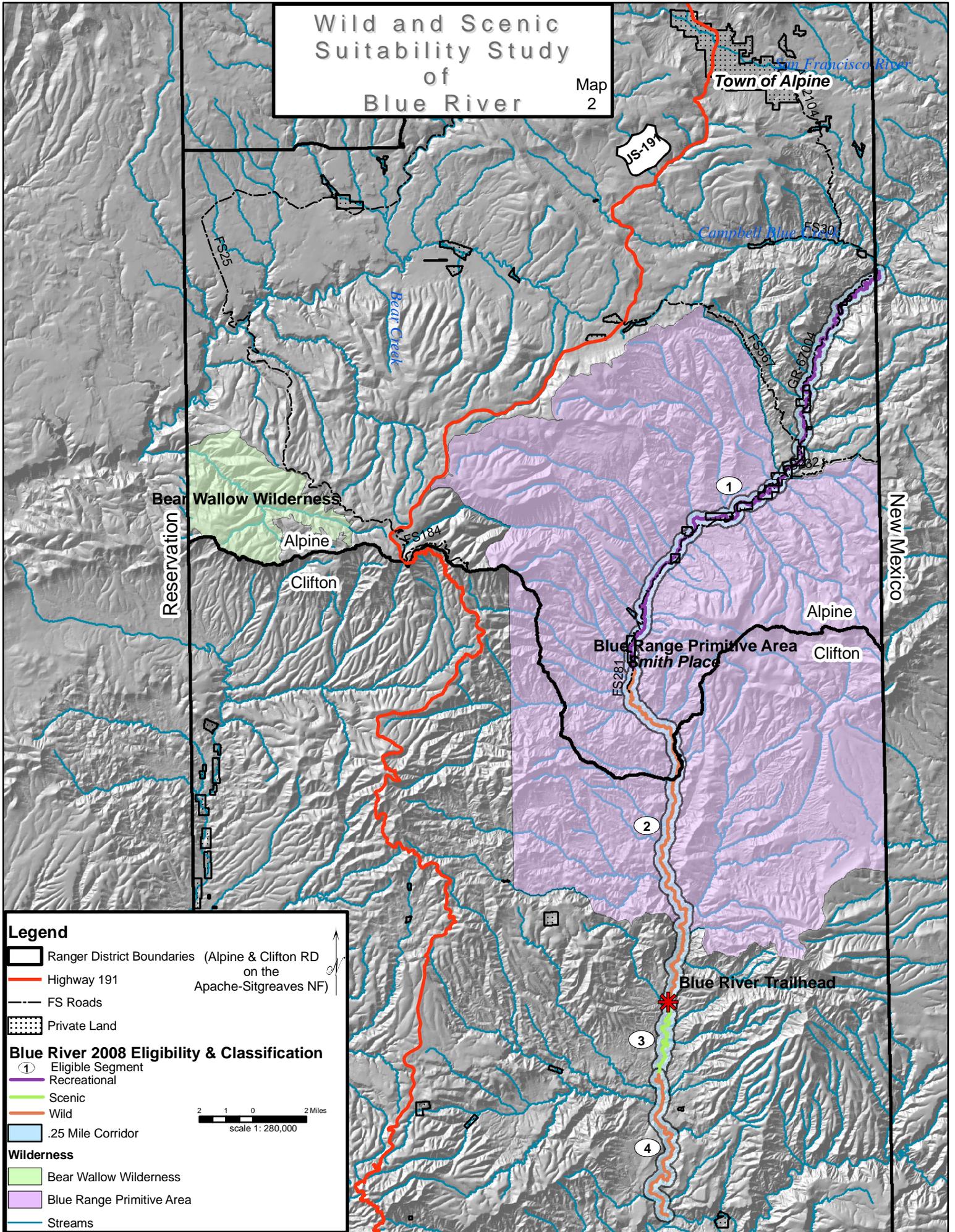
-  Blue River & K P
-  District Boundary
-  Towns
-  Major Highways
-  State

Disclaimer Statement

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Map created 12/11/2008 by g Morris c:\gis\wild_scenic\kp_blue.pdf

Wild and Scenic Suitability Study of Blue River

Map 2



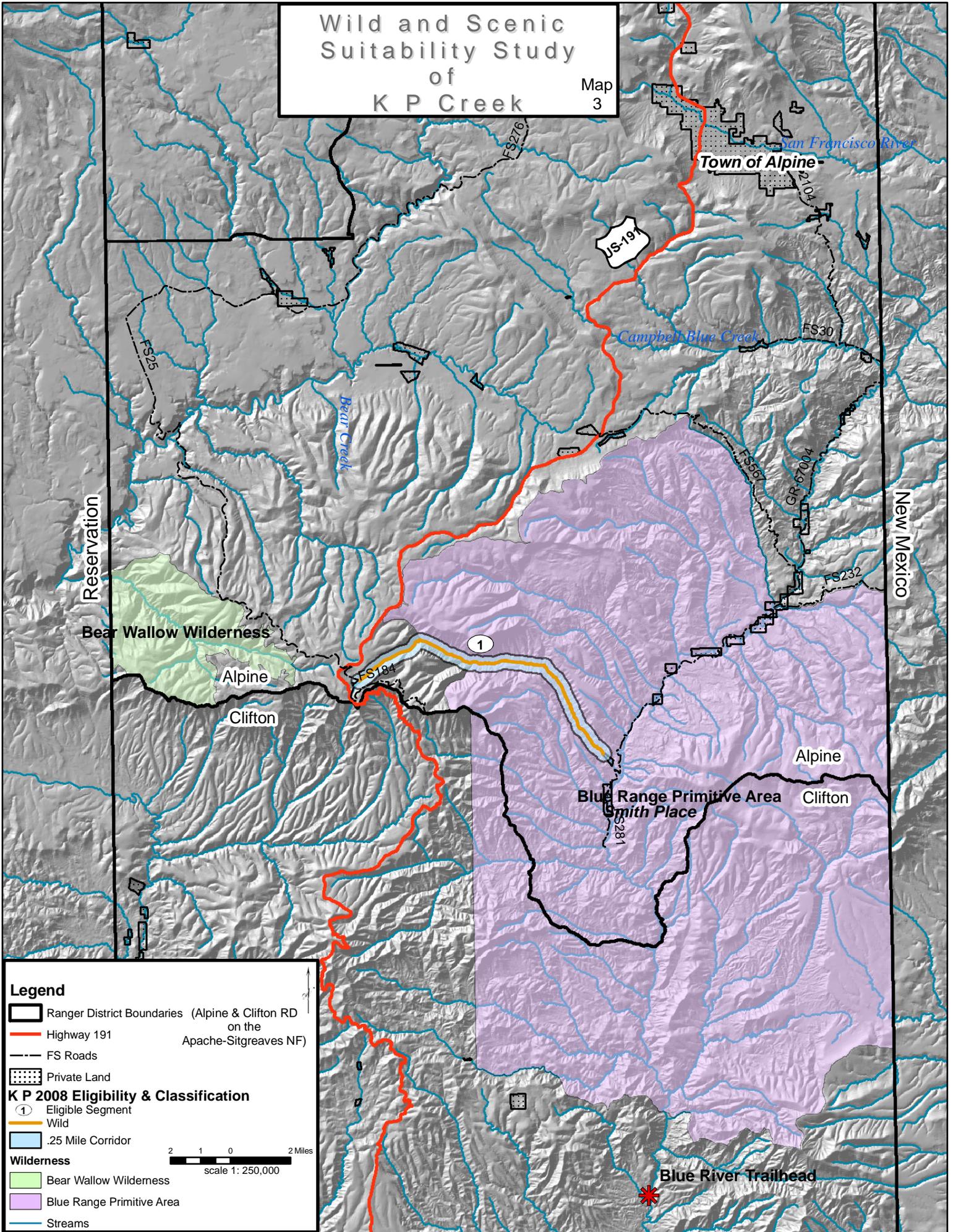
Legend

-  Ranger District Boundaries (Alpine & Clifton RD on the Apache-Sitgreaves NF)
-  Highway 191
-  FS Roads
-  Private Land
- Blue River 2008 Eligibility & Classification**
-  Eligible Segment
-  Recreational
-  Scenic
-  Wild
-  .25 Mile Corridor
- Wilderness**
-  Bear Wallow Wilderness
-  Blue Range Primitive Area
-  Streams

2 1 0 2 Miles
scale 1: 280,000

Wild and Scenic Suitability Study of K P Creek

Map 3



Legend

- Ranger District Boundaries (Alpine & Clifton RD on the Apache-Sitgreaves NF)
- Highway 191
- FS Roads
- Private Land
- K P 2008 Eligibility & Classification**
- ① Eligible Segment
- Wild
- .25 Mile Corridor
- Wilderness**
- Bear Wallow Wilderness
- Blue Range Primitive Area
- Streams

