

Questions and Data Dictionary for Roadless Area Evaluation of Wilderness Suitability

Introduction

The wilderness suitability evaluation helps determine whether an area identified in the roadless area inventory should be recommended for inclusion into the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). The evaluation is categorized by “[capability](#)”, “[availability](#)”, and “[need](#)” (see FSH 1909.12, Chapter 7 for more information). These three categories are the primary framework to evaluate whether an undeveloped area has opportunities and experiences that are dependent upon or enhanced by a wilderness environment. The following questions and rating definitions specifically help evaluate these inventoried areas. Each area identified in the recently updated roadless area inventory will be subject to all the considerations and questions listed below.

Each of the evaluation categories contains some contextual discussion from the Forest Service Handbook Wilderness Evaluation chapter. Additional information from other sources (letters, workshops, Topical Working Groups) has broadened the handbook’s questions to account for specific considerations on the Dixie and Fishlake National Forests in southern Utah.

The capability rating definitions help determine whether an undeveloped area is capable of providing wilderness values. The ultimate decision, made by the Forest Supervisor, will consist of an evaluation of all three categories as a single package rather than a collection of individual ratings.

Capability

Manageability

“In determining capability, consider the ability to manage an area as wilderness as required by the Wilderness Act. Section 2(c) of the Wilderness Act gives some direction toward this end by defining Wilderness as an area that “... (3) has at least 5,000 acres of land or is of sufficient size to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition....” Forest Service ability to manage an area as an enduring resource of wilderness, untrammelled by man, retaining its primeval character, and to protect and manage its natural character are all factors to consider. Also consider such factors as size, shape, and juxtaposition to external influences.”¹

Questions

- Do the boundary locations avoid conflict with important existing or potential public uses?
- Does the boundary provide the ability to control the area, which already has a lot of use?
- Is the boundary readily and accurately described, established, and recognizable on the ground?
- Do the boundaries, where possible, conform to terrain or other features?

¹ FSH 1909.12, 7.21(5)

- Do the boundaries, to the extent practicable, act as a shield to the sights and sounds of civilization outside the wilderness?
- Do the boundaries provide adequate opportunity for access into the area?

Ratings

- **Low**
 - Area does not have distinct topographic boundaries or is bounded by administrative boundaries that do not distinguish from adjacent ownership
 - Area has several “cherry stem” roads accessing the area’s interior
 - Motorized access is present throughout the interior of the area
 - Adjacent ownership and uses present conflicting uses
- **Medium**
 - Area boundary is partially tied to roads or distinct topographic features
 - “Cherry stem” roads are present, but leave large portion(s) of the area intact
 - Motorized access is infrequent, but present
- **High**
 - Areas has distinct topographic or road boundaries and is not dissected/bisected by motorized use
 - “Cherry stem” roads are non-existent or infrequent
 - Motorized access is not present in the area
 - Adjacent ownership and uses are consistent with the area’s manageability

Natural Integrity

“Determine the degree to which an area is natural or appears to be natural and free from disturbance so that the normal interplay between biotic species inhabiting the area continues.”²

Note: this evaluation relies mostly on whether a person with a scientific or professional land management background determines that the area exhibits proper natural process function. These processes can include fire, insects and disease activity, and natural plant succession.

Questions

- Have natural processes been allowed to run their course without human intervention?
- Does the area prevent incidental damage to ecosystems?
- Is the species composition or succession appropriate for the area?
- Are invasive species present and if so, are they increasing or dominant in the area?
- Does the area provide contiguous habitat for fish, wildlife and flora?
- Is motorized access present, and if so, how prevalent is it in the area?

Ratings

- **Low**
 - Natural processes are disjointed due human management activities, primarily fire suppression

² FSH 1909.12, 7.21(1)

- Motorized access is prevalent due to trail presence, area is dissected/bisected by these trails
- **Medium**
 - Natural processes have been sporadically altered by human management activities, primarily fire suppression
 - Motorized access is sporadic or only present on the perimeter of the area
- **High**
 - Natural processes have been operating uninfluenced by humans, species composition are mostly or entirely native
 - Motorized access is not present or extremely difficult

Natural Appearance

“Determine the degree to which an area is natural or appears to be natural and free from disturbance so that the normal interplay between biotic species inhabiting the area continues.”³

Questions

- Does the area’s vegetation appear “natural”?
 - *Note: this evaluation relies mostly on whether a layperson sees the area as “natural” based on their knowledge and understanding of what “natural” is or should be, or what they would like to see.*
- Is evidence of human activity present and if so, how much does it affect the area’s appearance?
- Is there an opportunity to observe animal and plant life in their native environments?

Ratings

- **Low**
 - Unclassified road or motorized routes are present and dominate the landscape’s appearance
 - Vegetation does not reflect what most people think a forest would look like throughout most of the area
- **Medium**
 - Unclassified road or motorized routes are present, but not dominant to the landscape
 - Vegetation in most of the area reflects what most people think a forest would look like, few areas exist that do not meet this appearance
- **High**
 - Unclassified road or motorized routes are rarely present or not present
 - Vegetation reflects what most people would think a forest looks like

Opportunity for Solitude

“Determine the degree to which an area provides visitors with the opportunity to gain a wide range of experiential benefits such as a feeling of solitude and serenity, a spirit of adventure and awareness, and a sense of self-reliance.”⁴

³ FSH 1909.12, 7.21(1)

Questions

- Does the area provide a feeling of isolation or a sense that civilization has been left behind?
- Is the area a place where man and wildlife can interact in a manner going back thousands of years?
- Is the experience natural for those able to visit the area?
- Are there intrusions by “cherry stem” roads?
- Can the traveler see or hear evidence of civilization from within the area?
- Is the area a quiet place free from motorized noise

Ratings

- **Low**
 - Encounters with humans or civilization is likely and regular, or are impacted by high seasonal use
 - Influence by outside development is prevalent (views, noise, smells)
 - Area is relative narrow and sinuous in shape, “edge effect” is prevalent
- **Medium**
 - Encounters with humans is infrequent, but common
 - Some viewpoints (mostly high elevation) provide opportunities to see surrounding developments
 - Some portions are distinctly separated due to topographic features
 - Area has some narrow portions, but much of the area is not influenced by perimeter “edge effect”
- **High**
 - Encounters with humans is rare
 - Visitors quickly leave behind civilization influence within a short distance (1/4 - 1/2 mile)
 - Area is not influenced by “edge effect”
 - Topographic features (i.e., narrow canyons) create areas of isolation

Opportunity for Challenge/Primitive Recreation

“Determine the degree to which the area offers visitors the opportunity to experience adventure, excitement, challenge, initiative, or self-reliance. The most desirable area offers many outstanding opportunities for adventure and challenge.”⁵

“Determine an area's capability of providing primitive and unconfined types of recreation such as camping, hunting, fishing, mountain climbing, ski touring, canoeing, boating, river rafting, backpacking, hiking, riding, photography, and other outdoor activities.”⁶

⁴ FSH 1909.12, 7.21(1)

⁵ FSH 1909.12, 7.21(2)

⁶ FSH 1909.12, 7.21(3)

Questions

- Are there outstanding opportunities for adventure, excitement, self-reliance, and challenge?
 - *Note: the key word here is “outstanding” and should be evaluated in the context of the overall planning area, such as the Dixie and Fishlake National Forests.*
- Does the area provide primitive and unconfined recreation? (See examples above)

Ratings

- **Low**
 - Area has little to no knowledge of recreational use due to no infrastructure (i.e., trails)
 - Access would mostly be bushwhacking or cross-country travel through vegetation
 - Terrain presents no challenge for travel
- **Medium**
 - Area has some infrastructure and/or attractive destinations to draw recreationists
 - Challenging terrain is confined to specific portions of area
- **High**
 - Area provides desirable attractions or destinations for primitive recreation, some infrastructure (i.e., non-motorized trails) exists to facilitate access for recreation activities
 - Terrain is widely diverse and highly challenging

Special Features

“Identify the range of geological, biological, or ecological strata or any particularly unique segment of these strata. Assess whether the area has any other scientific, educational, or historical values. Social, economic, and environmental factors must blend together with natural features to make the area desirable and manageable as wilderness.”

“Describe the roadless area's capability to provide outdoor education and scientific study, both formal and informal, in a manner that is compatible with wilderness. Abundant and varied wildlife may enhance an area's wilderness capability. If the primary objective should be the protection or management of one or more wildlife species, analyze the relative values of wilderness and wildlife management. In some instances, particularly where nonconforming structures or activities are necessary for management of the wildlife or its habitat, wilderness designation may not be appropriate. Special scenic features contribute to an area's wilderness capability.”⁷

Questions

- Are there features that are special to this particular area?
- Do these features provide opportunities for outdoor education and scientific study?
 - Examples can include historic features, scenery, wildlife habitat, etc.

⁷ FSH1909.12, 7.21 (1) and (4)

- Does the area serve as benchmark reference for comparing the health of National Forest lands?
- Does the area serve as a reserve for biological, ecological, and geological study (i.e., Research Natural Areas)?
- Do these features require nonconforming structures or activities?

Ratings

No rating required here. Identify the special feature(s) present and their contribution to the area.

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Availability

“[T]he determination of availability is conditioned by the value of and need for the wilderness resource compared to the value of and need for other resources. (emphasis added) To be available for wilderness, the values of the wilderness resource, both tangible and intangible, should offset the value of resources that formal wilderness designation would forego. (emphasis added) The predominant value does not necessarily reflect the use or combination of uses that would yield the greatest dollar return or the greatest unit output... Determine the degree of Forest Service control over the surface and subsurface of the area. The Forest Service should have sufficient control to prevent development of unresolvable, incompatible uses that would lessen wilderness character and potential... The effect that wilderness designation and management is likely to have on adjacent lands is also a necessary consideration in evaluating availability. Determine the effect of such designation on transportation systems outside the wilderness and identify the requirements for wilderness access and traveler transfer facilities. Determine whether the costs and locations of required facilities would be compatible with other management needs.”⁸

Lands Generally Unavailable for Wilderness⁹

Following are examples of lands that are generally best suited for development and intensive management for sustained yield production of resources other than wilderness. Depending on the seriousness of the resource needs, these lands may be considered unavailable for wilderness:

- **Increased water production and/or additional onsite storage**
 - The need is so vital and an obvious and inevitable public necessity that the installation or maintenance of improvements would be incompatible with wilderness
- **Wildlife management measures**
 - Wilderness designation would seriously restrict or prevent actions of considerable magnitude and importance
- **Highly mineralized areas**
 - Their existence has such strategic or economic importance and extent that restrictions or controls necessary to maintain the wilderness character of the land would not be in the public interest
- **Unique or outstanding natural phenomena**
 - General public access and special development to facilitate public enjoyment should be available
- **Clearly documented resource demands**
 - Examples include timber or mineral production or developed recreation areas, such as winter sports sites

⁸ FSH 1909.12, 7.22

⁹ FSH 1909.12, 7.22 (a)

- **Contractual agreements**
 - Lands committed for use, purposes, or activities that are not in concert with the requirements of the Wilderness Act of 1964

Questions

- Do the values of the wilderness resource (tangible and intangible) offset the area's current/future resource value(s) or uses?

Note: The predominant value should not necessarily reflect the use(s) that would yield the greatest dollar return or the greatest unit output.

- Resource values/uses to consider:
 - Recreation opportunities (motorized specifically) and demands (high use areas)
 - Wildlife habitat
 - Water and air quality
 - Livestock operations
 - Ecological systems, functions, and continuity
 - Timber opportunities
 - Mineral potential
 - Cultural and historical interests
 - Land use authorizations (i.e., communication sites)
- What resource demands and uses can this area satisfy?
 - Account for current use, trends, and potential future use of the above listed resources
- Do the wilderness resource values (tangible and intangible) preclude current/future management opportunities in this area?
 - Management considerations to consider:
 - Trail maintenance – what are the environmental effects of reduced or limited trail maintenance?
 - Livestock grazing – what limits would exist to address forage conditions or facilities (fences and gates, water tanks)?
 - Fire – what limits would exist with managed and prescribed natural fire, fire suppression, or fire fuels management?
 - Insect and disease – what limits would exist to address/monitor an insect and disease outbreak? Would the outbreak threaten human values outside the area?
 - Adjacent private lands – what human values on private land (i.e., wildfire risk to homes, desired living environment) would be:

- Threatened by a wilderness designation?
- Enhanced by a wilderness designation?
- Private land inholding - are the current or planned activities compatible with wilderness management?
- ❑ How much control of the area's surface and subsurface does the Forest Service control?
- ❑ What are the effects of wilderness designation on transportation systems outside of the area?
 - What access exists, or is needed, to help people visit the area or adjacent National Forest land?
 - Are the development costs for access facilities (roads, trails, trailheads) compatible with other management needs?
- ❑ How would county functions (search and rescue, trash pick-up) be affected by a wilderness designation?
 - Are funds available to help local counties provide services in the area?
Note: Be careful about assumptions about revenues produced by wilderness users vs. ATV users, etc.
 - Is the rest of country willing to support costs of wilderness management (i.e., user fees)?
- ❑ Have local counties already accepted some areas as possible wilderness areas?

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Need

“[A]n analysis of the degree to which it contributes to the *local and national distribution* of wilderness. (emphasis added) There should be *clear evidence of current or future public need for additional designated wilderness* in the general area under consideration (emphasis added) ...Deal with "need" on a national basis and evaluate such factors as the geographic distribution of areas, representations of landforms and ecosystems, and the presence of wildlife expected to be visible in a wilderness environment.”¹⁰

Assumptions¹¹

- Demand for wilderness increases with both an increasing population and a growing awareness of wilderness
- Some undeveloped lands provide many opportunities for a primitive recreation experience outside wilderness. These lands are going to decrease in acreage as the demands on public lands increase.
- Some visitor use that occurs in designated wildernesses is not dependent upon the wilderness environment.
- Within social and biological limits, management may increase the capacity of established wildernesses to support human use without unacceptable depreciation of the wilderness resource.
- To survive, some biotic species and/or associations may require the environment found only in a wilderness.

Questions

- ❑ How does the area contribute to the local and national distribution of wilderness?
 - On the national scale, Utah has relatively few wilderness areas (the Dixie NF has 3 designated areas; the Fishlake NF has no areas)
 - Southern Utah has many national parks and monuments that provide wilderness opportunities for visitors
- ❑ What is the clear evidence of current or future public need for additional designated wilderness in southern Utah?
 - Consider the [resent visitor pressure on other wildernesses, the trends in use, changing patterns of use, population expansion factors, trends and changes in transportation, and Nation-wide travel patterns.¹²
 - The extent to which nonwilderness lands on the National Forest, other Federal lands, State lands, and private lands other than wildernesses are likely to provide opportunities for unconfined outdoor recreation experiences.¹³

¹⁰ FSH 1909.12, 7.23

¹¹ FSH 1909.12, 7.23 (a)

¹² FSH 1901.12, 7.23 (b) (2)

- ❑ What public input/interest has been expressed about the area to be included in the NWPS?
 - People believe that more wilderness areas should be designated to preserve scenery. Proportionately, Utah has more scenic beauty and unique features than other areas of U.S. – this could create an obligation to preserve those areas.
- ❑ What is the "need" on a national basis?
 - Look at the geographic distribution of existing wilderness areas
 - Consider the location, size, and type of other wildernesses in the general vicinity and their distance from the proposed area. Consider accessibility of areas to population centers and user groups.¹⁴
 - Consider representations of landforms and ecosystems
 - Look at the area's ability to provide for preservation of identifiable landform types and ecosystems...This approach is helpful from the standpoint of rounding out a NWPS and may be further subdivided to suit local, subregional, and regional needs.¹⁵
 - A wider representation of ecosystems other than mountains should be in the NWPS. Consider areas that are not high-elevation.
 - Address the presence of wildlife expected to be visible in a wilderness environment.
 - Consider the ability of certain biotic species to compete with increasing public use and developmental projects that affect their habitats. Consider other available options, other than wilderness designation, for meeting this need.¹⁶
 - Consider the need to provide a sanctuary for those biotic species that have demonstrated an inability to survive in less than primitive surroundings.¹⁷
 - Look at the need for a protected area for other unique scientific values or phenomena.¹⁸
 - Local and national needs are different. Local communities bear impacts of change first. National interest and use of area can help identify need. Identify areas that get high use/interest from national interests.

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¹³ FSH 1901.12, 7.23 (b) (3)

¹⁴ FSH 1909.12, 7.23 (b) (1)

¹⁵ FSH 1909.12, 7.23 (b) (6)

¹⁶ FSH 1909.12, 7.23 (b) (4)

¹⁷ FSH 1909.12, 7.23 (b) (5)

¹⁸ Ibid