

Comments – Draft Wilderness Characteristics Evaluation Processes for Lands that may or may not be Suitable for Inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System

Forest Revision Planning Team:

These comments address the following questions: Does this draft outline what you hope to see in a transparent and consistent evaluation? Are the connections between evaluation considerations and wilderness characteristics clear? Will these criteria help determine which areas have low wilderness characteristics, and which are more "wild"? Will the criteria recognize the conservation benefits of overlapping Wilderness, Wild and Scenic River, and National Scenic Trail designations? Will the evaluation criteria and considerations mitigate for deficiencies in the Gunnison Travel Plan?

I recommend that the Planning Team adopt a Likert-type ordinal scale survey to evaluate Very Low to Very High ratings that correspond to wilderness suitability indicators. In addition, summary polygon ratings should be related to threshold values that are associated with whether or not a polygon may be suitable for inclusion in the NWPS. The survey would be completed by revision planning team specialists and then provided to the public along with the narratives for review and comment. This would facilitate comparing evaluations across polygons and add to the transparency of the process.

I recommend that the analysis step address the conservation benefits of overlapping Wilderness, Wild and Scenic River, and National Scenic Trail designations. Each congressional designation offers protections that the other does not. Overlapping designations would help ensure National Forest System lands are protected for current and future generations by protecting wilderness characteristics, outstandingly remarkable values of eligible wild and scenic rivers, and the nature and purposes of national scenic trails. Where National Trail corridors, Wilderness Areas, and/or Wild and Scenic Rivers overlap the most restrictive management measures would control. Protecting wilderness values would include, in part, establishing plan components that identifies recommended wilderness as not being suitable for motor vehicle use and mechanized transport.

Specific to National Scenic Trails, the NTSA states that, “national scenic trails, established as provided in section 5 of this Act, which will be extended trails so located as to provide for maximum outdoor recreation potential and for the conservation and enjoyment of the nationally significant scenic, historic, natural, or cultural qualities of the areas through which such trails may pass (16 U.S.C. 1242(a)(2), and that comprehensive planning will describe specific objectives and practices to be observed in the management of the trail, including the identification of all significant natural, historical, and cultural resources to be preserved...(16 U.S.C. 1244(f)).” The nature and purposes policy for the CDNST is: “The nature and purposes of the CDNST are to provide for high-quality scenic, primitive hiking and horseback riding

opportunities and to conserve natural, historic, and cultural resources along the CDNST corridor” (2009 CDNST Comprehensive Plan, FSM 2353.42, and 74 FR 51116—Notice of final amendments to comprehensive plan and final directives). The Continental Divide National Scenic Trail potential rights-of-way/management corridor is found within the following roadless areas: Texas Creek #167, Sanford Basin #170, Mirror Basin #169, Agate Creek #173, Cochetopa Hills #165, Cochetopa #141/#143, Carson #73, and Cataract #62.

The Gunnison Ranger District Travel Plan decision, dated June 28, 2010, failed to address the requirements of the 2009 CDNST Comprehensive Plan, FSM 2353.44b(11), and 36 CFR 212 for the CDNST travel route. This Gunnison Ranger District Travel Plan deficiency should be a consideration when preparing the Wilderness Characteristics polygon evaluations, designated area assessment report, the revised Forest Plan, and addressing revision NEPA requirements.

The Deputy Regional Forester of Operations, on September 30, 2010, affirmed the majority of the Gunnison National Forest Travel Plan decision, with two explicit exceptions. One of these exceptions addressed motor vehicle use on the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail:

“The designation decision of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail (CDNST) is reversed with the following instructions:

1. The CDNST is excluded from this decision and will revert to the previous decision related to travel management, which includes motorized travel. This direction is consistent with 36 CFR 212.50 (b), stating “the responsible official may incorporate previous administrative decisions regarding travel management made under other authorities, including designations and prohibitions of motor vehicle use...¹”
2. This change is effective immediately and should be reflected on the motor vehicle use map (MVUM).
3. The Gunnison National Forest shall analyze the Monarch Crest Trail within a larger context of CDNST management. A subsequent decision on designation of Monarch Crest Trail will be incorporated into travel management pursuant to revision designations in 36 CFR 212.54.”

There may be continuing confusion on whether or not this decision applies to the entirety of the CDNST on the Forest or if the decision is limited to only the Monarch Crest Trail section of the CDNST. A specific issue is the designation of Trail No. 787 for motor vehicle use, which is a CDNST section that is located east of Spring Creek Pass. This section of the CDNST has traditionally been managed for nonmotorized use as demonstrated in the 1983 Gunnison Basin Area Travel Plan. Implementation of the first instruction by itself would

¹ Specific to 36 CFR 212.50 (b), previous travel plans did not address the requirements of the National Trails System Act and as such failed to protect the nature and purposes of the CDNST.

reverse the designation decision and result in managing Trail No. 787 for nonmotorized use subject to any new decision. The third instruction directs that an analysis be completed of the Monarch Crest Trail within a larger context of the CDNST management. Trail No. 787 is within the larger context of CDNST management and should be considered in subsequent analyses that will address the CDNST planning requirements. The appeal decision instructions should be interpreted so that the motor vehicle use designation decision of the CDNST is reversed and that the first and second instructions apply to the entirety of the CDNST travel route that is within the Gunnison National Forest Travel Plan area.

Planning directives and the draft Wilderness Characteristics paper states, “The forest supervisor will determine which polygons to further analyze in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process.” I would caution that this direction may be inconsistent with the NEPA requirement to take a hard look at reasonable alternatives. CEQ regulations² provide guidance regarding the agency’s scope of actions. Aspects of an action that are inter-related should be considered during this process. If there are unresolved conflicts regarding alternative uses of resources, then a “hard look” at a reasonable range of alternatives will be needed. Final suitability determinations should be informed through NEPA processes.

Please include on the [Wilderness Story Map](#) a geospatial layer that displays the location of National Scenic and Historic Trail travel routes. Table 3 that follows describes specific evaluation recommendations.

For the planning team reference and the project record, I have attached the current version of a CDNST Planning Handbook.

Thank you for considering these comments.

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Attachment – CDNST Planning Handbook – v.02242018

² 36 CFR Part 220 does not lessen the applicability of the CEQ 40 CFR Part 1500 regulations on National Forest System lands (36 CFR 220.1(b)).

Table 3: Wilderness Characteristics Evaluation Guide

(Supplemental Criteria and Considerations)

Wilderness Characteristic	Evaluation Criteria	Evaluation Considerations
Criterion 2: Solitude <i>OR</i> Primitive and Unconfined Recreation	Question 2a.	*What are the inventoried ROS classes within the polygon? *Does the polygon include a designated National Scenic Trail?
Criterion 2: Solitude <i>OR</i> Primitive and Unconfined Recreation	Question 2b. Consider the extent to which the area [could] provide visitors with opportunities to engage in dispersed, undeveloped recreational activities that lead to a visitor’s ability to feel a part of nature [if plan components were established that supported Primitive or Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized ROS desired conditions].	*To what extent could the polygon provide for Primitive or Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized ROS class opportunities?
Criterion 4: Unique and outstanding qualities	Question 4a. Does the area contain rare plant or animal communities, or rare ecosystems, [connectivity corridors], or migratory corridors?	
Criterion 4: Unique and outstanding qualities	Question 4c.	*Does the polygon include a designated National Historic Trail?
Criterion 4: Unique and outstanding qualities	Question 4e.	*Does the polygon include any eligible Wild and Scenic River?

<p>Criterion 4: Unique and outstanding qualities</p>	<p>Question 4f. “May also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value (Wilderness Act Sec. 2(c)(4)).”</p> <p>Are there segments of a National Scenic Trail that passes through the area?</p>	<p>*If present, identify the National Scenic Trail travel route that passes through the area. *What is the extent of the selected or potential National Trail rights-of-way (16 U.S.C. 1246(a)(2))? *What is the extent of the existing or potential National Scenic or Historic Trail management corridor to be established to protect National Scenic Trail nature and purposes (values)?</p>
<p>Criterion 5: Manageability</p>	<p>Question 5a.</p>	<p>*To what degree will any portion of the polygon be protected through the establishment of a National Scenic Trail management corridor with plan components that protect the nature and purposes of the National Trail (5(a)(iii))?</p>