

# A close look reveals problems with wilderness proposals

## Open spaces best preserved by viability of ranches

By TOM COOPER  
For the Las Cruces Bulletin



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At a meeting with U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman and staff personnel in December 2008, a staff member handed People for Preserving Our Western Heritage (PFPOWH) three large maps reflecting the boundaries of the Doña Ana County, New Mexico Wilderness and National Conservation Areas (NCAs) proposal of the Albuquerque-based New Mexico Wilderness Alliance (NMWA). He asked that we complete the maps to reflect ranch improvements, which we agreed to do.

To assist in meeting Bingaman's request, PFPOWH paid for the services of the GIS (mapping) unit of the Doña Ana County Community Development Department to input all data and produce the maps and an improvements summary. They reflect the following:

- Acres:**
- Acreage in two proposed National Conservation Areas (NCAs) – 97,990
  - Acreage in 10 proposed wilderness areas – 357,063
- The 357,063 acres proposed for wilderness is larger by more than 50,000 acres than NMWA disclosed, without counting the additional 23,500 acres in Luna County, adjacent to the Doña Ana County line. The proposal includes 129,114 acres in two areas currently in multiple-use status, plus 24,096 acres in two Wilderness Study Areas, which were recommended for return to multiple-use status. The four areas were determined not suitable for wilderness by the U.S. Interior Department.

- Improvements:**
- Linear miles of improvements: fences – 297; water pipelines – 60; roads – 481; power transmission lines – 67; petroleum pipelines – 61; total – 966 miles
  - Number of other improvements in the areas and within 1 mile: wells – 20; springs – 19; buildings – 11; corrals – 34; earthen tanks – 116; mines – 23; storage tanks – 35; drinking troughs – 85; windmills – 10; total – 353

Numbers quoted include improvements within one mile of the proposed boundaries due to the connectivity of roads, water lines, water sources and storages, etc. based on the premise that improvements (or proposals for improvements) within at least one mile would be affected by designations, as related activity might be held to "impact" the wilderness.

The above data was input and summarized by the GIS Department of Doña Ana County from official Bureau of Land Management allotment maps, from improvements and GPS data provided by PFPOWH, from county records and from census data as to roads.

PFPOWH has held the position that the areas proposed for wilderness designations do not meet the criteria in the Wilderness Act of 1964. This position is based in part on the extensive system of roads and other improvements within all of the areas. The basic tenet of wilderness is that the areas are roadless and without the imprint of man.

Mechanized equipment, including vehicles, are not "allowed" in wilderness, which leads to closing of many roads. A NMWA staffer commented, "A road is no longer a road once it is closed." In actuality, the "imprints" of closed roads can survive hundreds of years, as have sections of the Camino Real. The NMWA has proposed a number of "cherry stems" within the proposed areas as another answer to the roads and other imprints of man. Their proposal is to "exclude" those roads and improvements from

the designated areas. The "cherry stems" would be "non-wilderness" areas within the wilderness and would consist of certain roads and small areas around improvements, all deemed to be "outside the wilderness."

Either side of the cherry stems would be wilderness. Access via certain cherry stems might be allowed to the public and to ranchers, while occasional access on other roads might be allowed only to ranchers, under a permitting process through BLM. All permit applications would be subject to a public comment period and, if access is granted, it would likely be subject to onerous restrictions and time limits. Nevertheless, ranchers would be required to apply for access lost in the process, which has been available to them and to the public for generations.

### Access is critical

Continuation of historic access is critical for management and maintenance of the ranches, is desired by the public and is necessary for the public's use and enjoyment of the federal lands. BLM in its study more than 25 years ago concluded that most recreational uses of the areas are associated with vehicular access. If these areas were designated wilderness, with access largely limited to walking or horseback, how much of the area's wilderness – the 357,063 acres (558 square miles) – would most members of the public ever be able to access and enjoy?

“... protection of the areas does not require designations of huge wilderness and NCAs.”

The answer is obvious – little, if any.

The U. S. government encouraged settlement and improvement of the federal lands in the Western states. Ranchers with federal grazing permits are required to secure permits allowing construction of improvements. Most improvements have been paid for directly by the ranchers, with some, in limited instances, paid from funds set aside from a percentage of the grazing fees paid by ranchers. The ranchers are required under terms of their grazing permits and by necessity to maintain the improvements. The ability to do so and to sustain viability of the ranches should not be lost due to an act of Congress proposed by an Albuquerque-based organization, which is not concerned with impacts on Doña Ana County citizens, our heritage and our livestock industry.

Some founders and board members of NMWA are longtime anti-grazing activists who have worked toward elimination of grazing on all public lands everywhere. Wilderness designations are a major step toward reaching that objective.

In submitting the completed maps and improvements summary to Bingaman, PFPOWH asked the senator to bear in mind the strong opposition to the wilderness proposal evidenced by the coalition of 14 range management professionals and 800 businesses and organizations, representing thousands of local employees and members who support an alternative proposal.

We also asked that he bear in mind the concerns expressed by coalition members, including: wilderness

becoming a corridor for human and drug trafficking; restrictions on access, which would be created for law enforcement, Border Patrol and Homeland Security; the creation of impediments to water impoundment, monitoring of runoff and flood control; brush treatment, erosion control and other beneficial conservation practices encouraged by NRCS, BLM and the New Mexico Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts would no longer be possible in areas designated as wilderness.

The relatively very weak support for the wilderness and NCA proposal, as reflected in the Doña Ana Wilderness Coalition listing should also be considered. A major Las Cruces organization recently withdrew its support for the proposal; a majority of its board and 10 past presidents are now members of the coalition opposing the Wilderness and NCA proposal.

### Concerns and conflicts

The following additional concerns and conflicts should be considered: mine closures and remediation requirements for public safety; mineral lease(s) in place on certain area(s); proposed high-voltage lines and energy corridor(s); alternative-energy production proposals; and, to the extent that ranchers are stripped of the ability to maintain water sources, the areas will become devoid of wildlife.

Continued strong preservation and protection of the areas does not require designations of huge wilderness and NCAs. The open spaces in Doña Ana County, the livestock ranches, will best be preserved by protecting the viability of the ranches and the ability to ranch. Failing that, the ranches and the open spaces will become fragmented by sales and development of private lands within the ranches.

The public is already locked out of most federal lands in Doña Ana County, with hundreds of thousands of acres in White Sands Missile Range, San Andres National Wildlife Refuge, Jornada Experimental Range, NASA and parts of White Sands National Monument closed to the public. And yet, NMWA has been quoted in a public meeting stating that they will be back for yet another round of proposed designations. Their proposals for wilderness would then exceed 500,000 acres. In response to a question, they stated that any negotiations regarding designations and acreages would be limited to slight boundary changes, and only with compensating acreage added elsewhere.

Albuquerque and Bernalillo County residents are rightfully proud of their Sandia Mountains Wilderness, which includes a total of 37,302 acres. Land legislation affecting Doña Ana County should be based on a proposal by and for county residents, designed to meet the needs and concerns of our local citizens.

We trust that Bingaman and our entire congressional delegation will give appropriate consideration to the information provided to them and will work with community leaders to achieve a common-sense, community-based proposal.

*Tom Cooper is a Doña Ana County rancher and Chairman of People for Preserving our Western Heritage. For more information, visit [www.PeopleForWesternHeritage.com](http://www.PeopleForWesternHeritage.com).*

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