

Doña Ana County Wilderness

PROPOSAL AT ODDS WITH CURRENT ECOLOGICAL SCIENCE

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The concept of Wilderness as a place where a person can find solitude in a "natural setting" undisturbed by man appeals to many Americans who are confined in cities where man dominates the natural landscape. Most Americans have never visited a Wilderness area but take some comfort in knowing these areas exist. The concept of establishing Wilderness areas started with the establishment of National Parks in the 1800s and was further developed by establishment of Wilderness areas in National Forests in the Wilderness Act of 1964. The areas for National Parks and Wilderness areas were spectacular, had not been logged or farmed and stood apart from the normal characteristics. However, the push for establishing additional Wilderness areas on Federal lands has brought areas that do not have spectacular scenery and do not currently have historic vegetation characteristics into consideration for Wilderness designations.

The Bureau of Land Management is guided by its 8560 Manual which was issued 4/27/83 and H-8560-1 issued 7/27/88. They state that "Wilderness areas are managed so as to preserve their wilderness character . . ." Wilderness characteristics fall into the following three categories:

■ *Naturalness* — The wilderness area "generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable."

■ *Outstanding opportunities for Solitude or a Primitive and Unconfined Type of Recreation.*

■ *Special Features* — Congress specified that Wilderness areas have "ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic or historical value."

The laxity in interpretation of the "Naturalness" definition is heading into conflict with current rangeland ecology concepts. What "generally appears to be natural" on rangelands may not be natural. Creosote bush and pavement have been a part of southern New Mexico all of our lifetimes and for many people, this is the "natural" state. At a recent natural areas conference,

an ecologist from an eastern university was under the impression that the California annual grasslands were always present. She, and most likely others, did not know that the area was once comprised of nearly all perennial grasses. Unfortunately, for many of us, our historical reference begins with our birth date.

Beginning in the 1990s rangeland ecologists began to adjust their thinking on how rangelands should be managed. Previously, the general principle was that rangelands were in balance and they would return to the historic vegetation if man's use was stopped. This principle would be consistent with Wilderness concepts of hands-off management resulting in good management. However, it is now recognized by rangeland ecological science that rangelands often go through "thresholds" and they will not return to the historic vegetation conditions without significant physical management actions.

The semi-desert lands in the Las Cruces area illustrate the new scientific thought. Brush invaded rangelands may generally appear to be natural and free of man's influence when in fact these are not in a natural state. Much of the land is not expected to return to the historic grassland vegetation conditions once brush species occupy a site. Once brush species occupy a site that historically produced grasslands, it will require such actions as chemical or mechanical brush control to return the site to that native grassland. It is also possible that it will require sand dune destruction, soil amendments, irrigation and reseeding to return to historic vegetation. Because of economic and/or physical reasons, it may not be possible to return to historic vegetation conditions in some areas, but the potential might be good in others.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Agricultural Research Service — Jornada Experimental Range, and BLM had a cooperative program to document the current science of the rangelands in southern New Mexico. Each ecological site has a description of the kinds of vegetation communities that may occupy the site, the kinds of disturbances and remediation practices that move these vegetation communities from one

"state" to another. These ecological site descriptions are available at the New Mexico NRCS web site, www.nm.nrcs.usda.gov.

Research at New Mexico State University and other universities and research organizations, along with results of treatments completed in recent years, have improved our understanding of how desert grasslands respond to various management actions. We can expect that new and improved science will further increase agency abilities to reseed and return native grasslands. However, whether the herbicides and mechanical practices will be allowed in areas designated as Wilderness or Wilderness Study Areas is anyone's guess. Under the BLM's 25 year old manual, if such practices are determined to be consistent with returning the area's naturalness, they might be allowed. However, our experience and history indicates that once an area is designated "Wilderness", no vegetation manipulation will be allowed. Extreme limitations placed on agencies and producers for ingress and egress with mechanized equipment coupled with the act of manipulating vegetation make this idea of "managing Wilderness" extremely unlikely. Thus, the end result is that more of the landscape departs from the natural vegetation state.

We suggest the most logical approach to the situation is to not designate areas as Wilderness that do not have historic vegetation conditions. We believe that prudent proposals for Wilderness areas in New Mexico must include a thorough analysis of the present and future vegetative state conditions. Lands that will require active management actions to return to historic vegetation conditions should not be considered for Wilderness or Wilderness Study Areas. They should be eliminated from further consideration until the historic vegetation has returned.

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