

## **SILVER PEAK RANGE WILDERNESS STUDY AREA**

### **1. THE STUDY AREA - 33,900 acres**

The Silver Peak Range WSA (NV-060-338) is located in Esmeralda County about 10 miles west of the town of Silver Peak and 40 miles southwest of Tonopah. The entire WSA is comprised of public land with no private inholdings. Topographic features form the boundaries of the WSA. The 6,000 foot contour line and a series of drainages comprise the northeast boundary, while peak to peak points form nearly the remainder of the WSA's boundary. The Silver Peak Range WSA is located in the northwest corner of the Silver Peak Range and is roughly 8 miles wide and 6 miles long.

### **2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE -           0 acres recommended for wilderness 33,900 acres recommended for nonwilderness**

The recommendation for this WSA is to release all 33,900 acres for uses other than wilderness.

This recommendation differs from the Proposed Action (Partial Wilderness alternative), analyzed in the Esmeralda -Southern Nye Resource Area Final Wilderness Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) where 17,850 acres were recommended as suitable for wilderness and 17,234 acres were recommended as unsuitable for wilderness. The proposed action analyzed in the FEIS relied heavily on the opinion that even if mineral deposits were to occur, at least in the area recommended for wilderness, they would not be developed because of the enormous effort and cost of economically removing minerals from this rugged area. Reported mineral potential analyzed in the FEIS proposed action contributed to 17,234 acres not being recommended for wilderness.

After the FEIS was completed, the U.S. Geological Survey and Bureau of Mines (USGS/BOM) report, U.S. Geological Survey Bulletin 1731-G, was published. This report concluded on page G1 that, "No identified resources are present in the study area. However, two parts of the study area have high and moderate resource potential and the remainder has low resource potential for gold and silver in epithermal veins." Based on the USGS/BOM report and the determinations in the FEIS, the BLM reasoned that wilderness values in this area outweighed the value of potential mineral development, after carving out any portions of the WSA with potentially high mineral values. Consequently, the BLM recommended to the Secretary of the Interior, Manuel Lujan, that the Proposed Action identifying 17,850 acres suitable for wilderness designation and 17,234 acres unsuitable for wilderness designation be adopted.

Upon review of the Bureau's recommendation by the Secretary, the Secretary reversed the Bureau's recommendation from 17,850 acres suitable for designation, to "0" acres suitable for designation as wilderness. The Secretary cited as his rationale a USGS report which assigned a gross value to in-place minerals in WSAs. This report was entitled "Quantitative Assessments of the Energy and Mineral Resources Within Eighteen Wilderness Study Areas in the States of Colorado, Nevada, Oregon, and Utah." In 1993, a select USGS commissioned panel recommended "the USGS discontinue the practice of providing gross in-place values to those making land use decisions." Further, the panel said the report ". . . is not a useful measure of the social value of mineral resources." Accordingly, the report was not useful as a basis for decisions about wilderness designation.

Shortly thereafter, several wilderness groups, represented by the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, filed suit against Secretary Lujan requesting that the Secretary reconsider the decision to drop the WSA from the Department's recommendation to the President of areas deserving permanent protection as wilderness. In 1994, a settlement was reached whereby Secretary Babbitt agreed "to take a fresh look at all BLM candidate wilderness areas as designation bills are taken up by Congress."

### **3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS**

**A. Naturalness:** The Silver Peak Range is remarkably pristine and natural. The WSA contains the northwest corner of the Silver Peak Range. The central feature is a flat-topped, three-mile long summit ridge with Piper Peak, 9,450 feet, its highest point. The rest of the WSA consists of the rugged canyons and ridges that radiate from the summit ridge. Two long drainages, Icehouse and Piper, cut canyons through colorful formations of white, pink and green tufts and other volcanic rocks. Upper elevations are heavily forested with pinyon pine and juniper except for the distinctive sagebrush "meadows" on the summit ridge and other flat-top ridges in the WSA. Below 7,000 feet to the lowest point at 5,500 feet are desert shrub communities of shadscale and rabbit brush. Only two man made improvements are found in the WSA. An area of mining assessment work consisting of two blade cuts and about a half mile of blade road is located just inside the west boundary. The second area, a spring development at Blind Spring, consists of an abandoned trough, broken pieces of pipe and a rock lined pond.

**B. Solitude:** The Silver Peak Range WSA offers outstanding opportunities for solitude because of a combination of topographic and vegetative screening. The size of the area and the configuration are adequate to offer opportunities for solitude. The exception is the narrow, three mile wide, northern extension. However this extension is divided by a 2,000 foot ridge drained by narrow canyons. Visitors would be screened from each other and the outside in spite of being within a mile or less from the boundary. The rugged canyons and "badlands" topography on the north and west side of the WSA have sufficient topographic screening in spite of the low growing vegetation. Although the southeast and northeast slopes are less rugged, they are forested with pinyon pine and junipers which offers excellent screening. The great number of possible destinations and springs will help disperse wilderness visitors.

**C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation:** A diversity of high quality recreation opportunities are available and day hiking and backpacking are outstanding. The varied topography, attractive rock formations, diverse plant communities including lush riparian areas, water, bighorn sheep, mule deer, chukar and wild horses, outstanding views and variety of destinations are its best features.

**D. Special Features:** The Silver Peak Range WSA has outstanding special features. A large herd of 118 desert bighorn sheep. About 50 percent of their critical summer range is within the WSA. The largest herd of wild horses in this vicinity inhabit the Silver Peak Herd Area. The WSA makes up about 15 percent of this herd area. This WSA has excellent examples of volcanic activity. The most significant feature is the Silver Peak caldera. The caldera underlies the northeast portion of the WSA. Obsidian pebbles and petrified wood are common in Icehouse Canyon wash. Only two archaeological sites have been located, but the numerous sources of food and water, a source of obsidian and proximity to Fish Lake indicate a high favorability for prehistoric sites.

### **4. MANAGEABILITY**

The Silver Peak Range WSA is considered to be manageable over the long term. The WSA has numerous steep canyons and rock cliffs along the northern and western perimeters which make for difficult access. There are no roads or ways into the WSA. Control of off-road vehicle use on the approaches to the southern mountains and canyons would require additional patrolling. Icehouse canyon will probably require some form of site specific management due to the restricted accessibility and the area's popularity.

Should mineral development occur along areas adjacent to the WSA, more intensive management would be required. Additional exploration along the edges of the WSA could result in situations requiring more management. On the 17,234 acres recommended for release for other uses, there are 480 acres of mining claims of which 200 acres are pre-FLPMA. Boundaries of this area would need to be accurately located on the ground.

## **5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES**

The U.S. Bureau of Mines and the U.S. Geological Survey prepared a mineral report on the 17,850 acres recommended for designation. The mineral resource potential stated in part: The southern part of the study area has high resource potential for gold and silver in epithermal veins. Stream-sediment samples from this part of the study area contain anomalous concentration of elements that typically occur in gold and silver vein deposits. Geophysical studies indicate the possibility of near-surface alteration concealed by an overlying caprock of unaltered material in this area. One area in the northwestern part of the study area has a moderate potential for gold and silver. Stream-sediment samples from this part of the study area contain anomalous concentration of elements that typically occur in gold and silver vein deposits. Rock units in this area are the same as in the high-potential area, but the area lacks the geophysical and structural evidence found in the high-potential area. The remainder of the area has a low potential for gold and silver in epithermal veins.

An active geothermal system exists in Fish Lake Valley about five miles northwest of the study area and many geothermal energy leases exist near the northwest boundary of the study area. No evidence of active hydrothermal system was found in the study area, but the Fish Lake Valley system may extend into the study area. For this reason, the entire area is classified as having a low potential for geothermal energy resources. The resource potential for oil and (or) gas in the study area is low. The 33,900 acre Silver Peak Range WSA contains 540 acres of mining claims, of which 200 acres are pre-FLPMA. There are no oil and gas or geothermal leases.

## **6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC PUBLIC COMMENTS**

Fifteen comments were received during the initial inventory in 1979. Five agreed with further study of the area and ten disagreed. During the intensive inventory, 37 specific comments and 2,327 general comments stating the WSA met wilderness criteria were received. The majority of the specific comments dealt with outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation and supplemental values including desert bighorn sheep and views of the White Mountains. Eight mining companies commented that the WSA lacked wilderness values and possessed mineral values.

During the issue identification stage for the RMP, four specific comments opposed to wilderness designation were received from individuals connected with the Foote Mineral Company and the Sunshine Mining Company. One local resident supported designation of this WSA.

Public hearings were held in Pahrump, Goldfield, and Las Vegas, Nevada. During the public hearing and comment period, a total of 54 comments were received. Six supported the Proposed Alternative, 38 supported more wilderness than the Proposed Alternative, and 10 supported less wilderness than the Proposed Alternative.

No local government commented on this WSA. The State, during its consistency review, did not concur with the Preferred Alternative. They opposed any suitable recommendation for this WSA stating the wilderness values did not outweigh the mineral values and that designation would further add to desert bighorn conflicts. One Federal agency, the Environmental Protection Agency stated the criteria used for the selection of the Preferred Alternative was unclear. They questioned why the entire manageable portion of this WSA was not preliminarily recommended for wilderness.