

Colorado's Canyon Country Wilderness Proposal

Dolores River Canyon

With colorful and spectacular sandstone walls, entertaining whitewater, and slopes to the river studded with pinon, juniper, and Ponderosa pine, the Dolores River is truly one of the most beautiful and thrilling river experiences in the world. Its value is further enhanced by its being one of only a handful of rivers in the country with trip durations of six or more days.

Citizens Wilderness Proposal: 41,133 acres
BLM Wilderness Study Area: 29,415 acres
BLM Field Office: San Juan Field Office (Durango)
Location: Dolores River Canyon is in Montrose County, approximately 17 miles west of Naturita and five miles south of Paradox.

Wilderness Qualities

Dolores River Canyon is a pristine desert area containing some of the most outstanding canyon scenery in Colorado. It includes benchlands and mesa uplands, portions of five tributary canyons, and a segment of the Dolores River recommended as a wild river under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1976.

Twelve geological formations spanning 160 million years of geologic history are exposed by the river in the gorge; the predominant formation is red Wingate Sandstone. The cliffs rise to benches of bedrock 500 to 700 feet above the river, with the canyon rim 1,100 feet above the river. Tributary canyons include La Sal Creek, Coyote Wash, Spring Canyon, Bull Canyon, and Wild Steer Canyon, all delightful canyons with sculpted slickrock and plunge pools.

Wildlife includes the endangered peregrine falcon that nests in nearby Paradox Valley and may hunt in the Dolores River Canyon. Golden eagles nest here and bald eagles can be seen. Mule deer, mountain lions, and bobcats are common. The canyon is considered prime habitat for desert bighorn sheep and river otters.

Dolores River Canyon is popular for hiking, rafting, kayaking, and canoeing. During late May and early June, several thousand rafters typically enjoy the many rapids in the canyon, though none is especially dangerous. Hiking is popular in the tributary canyons, with Coyote Wash a favorite stopping place for rafters. Petroglyphs are found in some of the tributary canyons and the main gorge. The mesa tops offer spectacular views of Utah's La Sal Mountains.

Thomas Klema, Peregrine River Outfitters, Durango

Vegetation varies from pinyon-juniper woodland, oakbrush, and sagebrush on the mesa uplands to tamarisk, willows, boxelder, rushes, sedges, and occasional cottonwoods along the river. A number of rare plants grow within the WSA, including the Eastwood monkeyflower (said to grow in shallow caverns in cliffs on the lower portion of Coyote Wash), Kachina daisy, and *Mertensia arizonica*.

Resource Information

No oil and gas leases exist within the WSA. Some of the citizen expansions to the WSA have been leased for gas development. No wells have been drilled.

In the past some claims for copper and silver were filed, but never developed. An existing mining operation for precious and base metals is situated outside the WSA



Hiking is popular in several of the tributary canyons.

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in upper La Sal Creek along a fault zone. The GEM report for Dolores River Canyon reports a low probability of finding uranium in the area.

Portions of five grazing allotments are located within Dolores River Canyon WSA. They are used primarily in winter on the fringe of the WSA with little actual use in the canyons.

No commercially valuable woodlands exist in the area.

The Dolores River flows through the heart of the area. La Sal Creek drains the east side of Utah's La Sal Mountains into the northwest quadrant of the unit. The other major tributary canyons contain springfed, intermittent streams.



During late May and early June, several thousand rafters a year typically enjoy the many rapids in the canyon

Dolores River Canyon includes approximately 30 miles of the Dolores River between Slickrock and Bedrock, downstream of McPhee Dam and major irrigation diversions to the Montezuma Valley. The river's flow is controlled by the Bureau of Reclamation's releases from McPhee Dam and by pre-existing irrigation diversions. The Bureau of Reclamation has discussed modifications of its flow regime to benefit the coldwater trout fishery immediately below the dam (which is located 50-60 river miles upstream of the wilderness) as well as recreational whitewater boating. The CWCB holds an instream flow right for approximately 70 cfs during late summer months.

Boundary Issues

Citizens propose several additions totaling about 12,000 acres more than BLM's recommended wilderness boundary. A 750-acre addition is proposed in Upper Coyote Wash, taking the boundary to the Utah state line. This is a natural extension of the canyon and is the most



View from Nyswonger Mesa. (Mark Pearson)

popular of the tributary canyons.

Approximately 2,200 acres are proposed for addition on Nyswonger Mesa. Several rapidly eroding ways cross the mesa, but they have relatively small impact on the overall naturalness of the mesa. There is no longer any vehicle access to the mesa top because landslides and erosion have obliterated the 1950s era uranium exploration road. The mesa's inclusion would diversify the wilderness by adding an expanse of forested mesa lands with stunning views of the surrounding peaks and twisting tributary canyons.

Approximately 900 acres in Bull Canyon, including historic Indian Henry's Cabin, and along the bench below Wild Steer Mesa are included to add protection to this beautiful canyon. The boundary follows recognizable topographic features along the canyon rim. BLM generally concurs with this addition.

A small addition of 200 acres on the south near Andy's Mesa takes the boundary to the rim.

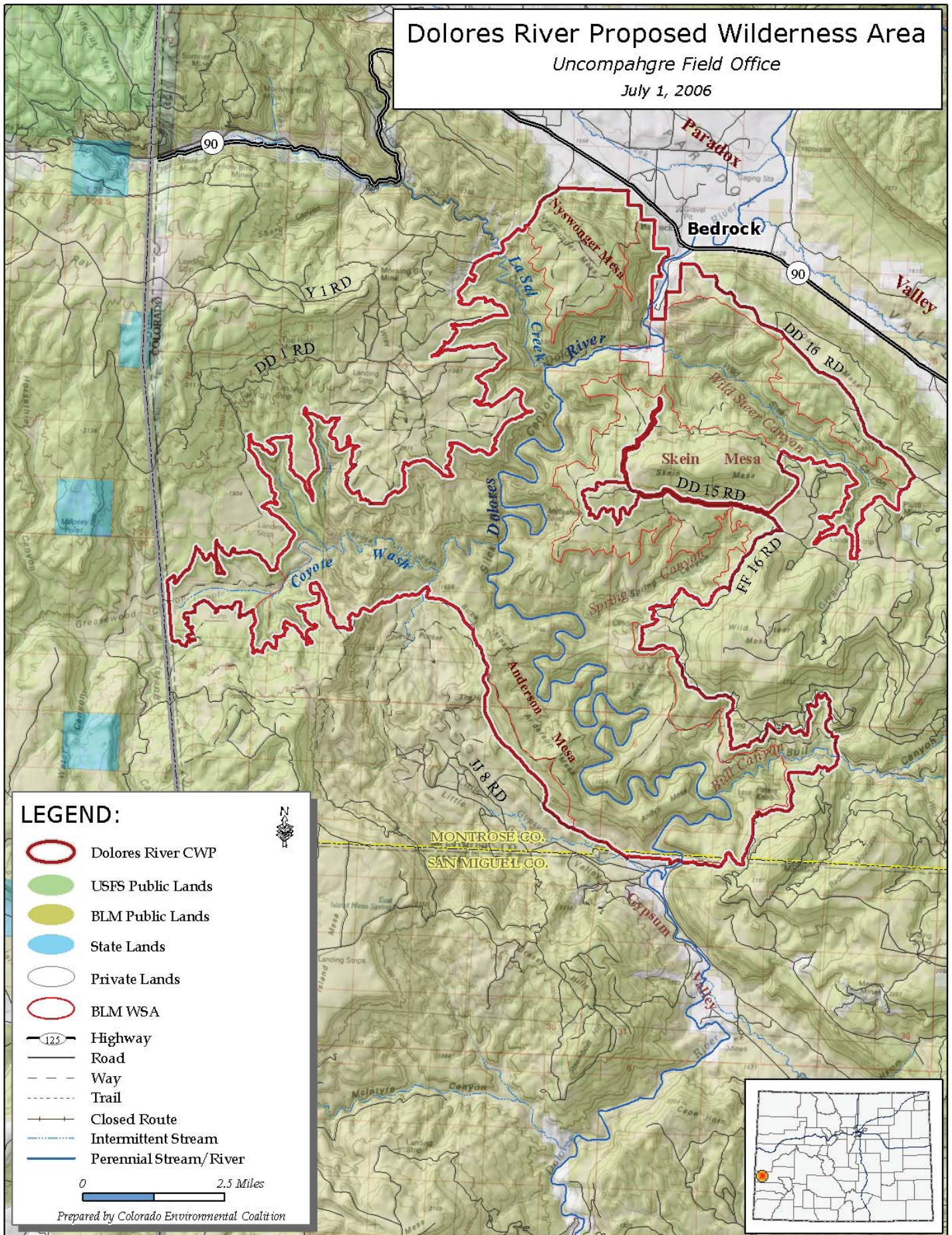
Approximately 3,700 acres including Skein Mesa and the benches above Spring Canyon are proposed for inclusion in the wilderness. The eroding vehicle ways in this area are returning to a natural condition. These benchlands add ecological diversity to the area by including forested mesas.

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Dolores River Proposed Wilderness Area

Uncompahgre Field Office

July 1, 2006



LEGEND:

-  Dolores River CWP
-  USFS Public Lands
-  BLM Public Lands
-  State Lands
-  Private Lands
-  BLM WSA
-  Highway
-  Road
-  Way
-  Trail
-  Closed Route
-  Intermittent Stream
-  Perennial Stream/River

0 2.5 Miles

Prepared by Colorado Environmental Coalition