

Colorado's Canyon Country Wilderness Proposal

Grape Creek

Grape Creek is very important to me and my family because, while it is close to Canon City and is a wildlife corridor between the Arkansas Valley and the Wet Mountain Valley it also has rugged red rock scenery and is used by hikers, fishermen, hunters, and photographers.

Ron Lautaret, Cañon City

Citizens Wilderness Proposal: 44,372 acres
BLM Wilderness Study Area: 21,525 acres
BLM Field Office: Royal Gorge Field Office (Cañon City)
Location: Grape Creek is situated 10 miles southwest of Canon City in Fremont County.

Wilderness Qualities

The proposed Grape Creek Wilderness consists of rugged, scenic terrain administered by the BLM and the San Isabel National Forest. Although administration is split, the area is ecologically and physiographically one diverse wilderness centered on Grape Creek and the surrounding mountains.

Contrasts characterize the proposed wilderness, ranging from Grape Creek's pools and riffles to the high, forested ridge of Tanner Peak. Elevations vary from 6,400 to 9,600 feet. Life zones range from upper Sonoran to montane, offering diverse vegetation including sagebrush, rabbitbrush, cholla cactus, and yucca in the canyon, as well as pinyon-juniper woodland, ponderosa pine, and Engelmann spruce forest intermixed with meadows at higher elevations.

BLM recognized the value of Grape Creek's riparian zone and fishery by designating the stream corridor an Area of Critical Environmental Concern in its 1994 Royal Gorge Resource Management Plan.

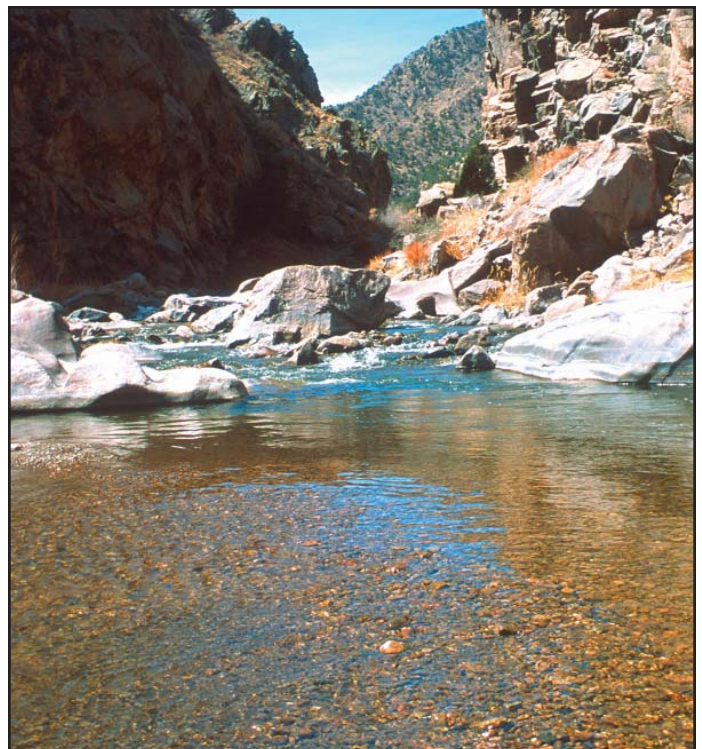
The designation prohibits mining and off-road-vehicles and requires modification of grazing practices to reduce damage to the riparian zone.

Predator populations, including a high concentration of mountain lion, indicate abundant prey species. Deer, elk, black bear, and many smaller mammals prosper here. The expansive cliffs house nesting and roosting birds-of-prey, including eagles. The Colorado Division of Wildlife has identified possible nesting sites for the imperiled peregrine falcon as well. Grape Creek, a large perennial stream, provides promising fishery habitat.

Outstanding opportunities for primitive recreation and solitude include hiking, backpacking, horseback riding, fishing, bird-watching, hunting, and photography, all of which are enhanced by the diverse ecological and topographic features of the area. Remnants of a turn-of-the-century railroad along Grape Creek are unobtrusive, but lend historical interest to portions of the canyon. Grape Creek has a long recreational season due to its aridness and lower elevations, much different from most presently designated wilderness in Colorado. Since several million people live within 100 miles of the area, great interest exists in this type of recreation opportunity.

Resource Information

BLM describes low development potential for minerals in Grape Creek. The area includes only two mining



Grape Creek provides world-class recreational opportunities.

claims that predate the WSA's establishment and some claims were filed after the WSA was created. Parts of the Tanner Peak portion of the area have been leased for oil and gas exploration in the past, but source rocks appear to be lacking and no development has occurred. No conflicts have existed between mineral development and wilderness values during more than 20 years of wilderness studies, and none are foreseen. BLM's designation of the canyon as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern withdraws the area from further mineral entry in any case.

None of the timber in the area is in sufficient quantity to make harvest economically or environmentally feasible, according to the managing agencies. Grazing structures, mostly along Grape Creek, are minimal. They consist mostly of barbed wire fences and are not detrimental to wilderness qualities. BLM intends to limit further grazing developments in the canyon as part of its management of this Area of Critical Environmental Concern.

BLM closed the route in Pierce Gulch between Upper and Lower Grape Creek WSAs to motorized use in 1998 because of damage to the terrain. All BLM lands in the CWP are presently closed to motorized vehicles. Some off-road vehicle use, ATV's and trail bikes, occurs in the USFS portion of the area. This use has created some erosion of trails and meadows. ORV use would be prohibited with wilderness designation, but BLM has already administratively closed its portion of the area to motor vehicles.

Grape Creek includes 105 acres of private inholdings in the form of patented mining claims grouped in three clusters. The state of Colorado owns mineral rights to 360 acres within the proposed wilderness.

Grape Creek is a major perennial stream that drains the majority of the Wet Mountain Valley in southcentral Colorado. Water flow through the area is controlled upstream by DeWeese Reservoir. The Colorado Division of Wildlife and BLM are working with the irrigation company to provide managed flows that will enhance Grape Creek's fishery. The reservoir company has agreed to allow CDOW a 500 acrefoot minimum pool in the reservoir for fishery and recreation purposes,



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and has also agreed to provide BLM storage space for water for instream flow releases. BLM hopes to acquire 400 acre-feet for such releases. The reservoir controls the creek's flow and maintains a steady volume most of the year.

Boundary Issues

Proposed wilderness boundaries for Grape Creek generally coincide with the Upper and Lower Grape Creek Wilderness Study Areas and the USFS Tanner Peak Roadless Area, with some additions of BLM and state land.

Citizens propose small deletions from the WSA and area west of Sunset City Gulch that will eliminate human imprints detrimental to the area's naturalness.

Additions of primarily state lands are proposed in East Mill Gulch on the southwest, in Pine Gulch on the west, below Horseshoe Mountain on the northeast, and in Bear Gulch on the southeast. These total approximately 1,900 acres.

Citizens propose an important addition of approximately 1,300 acres to BLM's WSA boundaries: a strip of land along East Pierce Gulch and West Pierce Gulch where BLM has closed a route to vehicular use. This addition joins the BLM's two Grape Creek WSAs into one unit.

In addition to the 105 acres of private inholdings, the CWP includes 1,900 acres of state school sections and 360 acres of split-estate minerals owned by the state.

