

Colorado's Canyon Country Wilderness Proposal

Handies Peak

I consider the Handies/Redcloud WSA to be the premier wilderness playground the San Juan Mountains have to offer. It would be criminal in this new millennium to do anything but protect the beauty of this exceptional area. Wilderness designation simply ensures the continuing enjoyment of this glorious place for us here today and for future generations.

Rosemary Knight, C.P.A., Lake City

Citizens Wilderness Proposal: 72,397 acres
BLM Wilderness Study Area: 16,836 acres
BLM Field Office: Gunnison Field Office. The Forest Service's Gunnison National Forest and Rio Grande National Forest share management of the area.
Location: The proposed Handies Peak Wilderness is 15 miles southwest of Lake City in Hinsdale County. It consists of BLM's Handies Peak Wilderness Study Area and the adjacent Forest Service Carson Peak Roadless Area, studied for wilderness in RARE II.

Wilderness Qualities

The proposed Handies Peak Wilderness is one of the largest unprotected roadless areas remaining in Colorado. It contains 15 miles of the Continental Divide of the scenic San Juan Mountains and sits at the headwaters of both the Rio Grande and Lake Fork of the Gunnison River. The area forms a critical missing link in the larger protected landscape of the San Juan Mountains and serves as an ecological corridor connecting the northern and southern San Juans. The most prominent feature is 14,048-foot Handies Peak in the northern end of the area, while two 13,700 foot peaks, Carson Peak and Pole Creek Mountain, dominate the expansive tundra to the south. Handies Peak is the 40th highest peak in Colorado, and the highest peak under BLM jurisdiction outside of Alaska.

The landforms of this area present intriguing contrasts. The Gunnison side is precipitous and rugged, characterized by massive volcanic peaks and huge glaciated valleys dotted with numerous waterfalls and moss-covered grottoes. These valleys provide access to the high rolling tundra and volcanic peaks of the central part of the area. More deep valleys drain to the south into the Rio Grande. A unique feature of these southerly drainages is the presence of volcanic "beehives", cones of ash and lava, one of which sits astride Pole Creek in the form of an arch.

The proposed Handies Peak wilderness represents one of the most natural, undisturbed habitats for elk in the state, supporting a large herd which provides rise to excellent hunting. A herd of bighorn sheep inhabits the area. A pre-World War II population of 100 animals has been reduced because of improved vehicle access and competition from domestic sheep. About 24 bighorn sheep currently winter along the Lake Fork of the Gunnison River on the area's northern side.

The watershed protected by the proposed wilderness includes portions of the recharge area for groundwater which Lake City taps for its domestic supply. Wilderness designation will serve to enhance the quality of this water source by preventing the sort of toxic contamination from mining activities which is prevalent in surrounding areas. The extensive tundra of the area also soaks up water and provides a major contribution to the Rio Grande watershed, a primary resource for agriculture in the San Luis Valley.



Sloan Lake, American Basin. (Mark Peason)

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Handies Peak contains approximately 12 miles of the Colorado Trail and the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail. The area also forms the scenic backdrop for the Alpine Loop Backcountry Byway, visited by a half million people annually as they drive over Engineer and Cinnamon Passes.

Resource Information

The southern portions of the proposed wilderness, around Carson Peak and Pole Creek Mountain, are largely composed of volcanic ash and tuff which form scenic cliffs and "beehives", but the area has little economic mineral potential. BLM's study of the Handies Peak WSA on the north end showed the eastern segments of that area, Lake Fork, to have a low mineral potential. The quality and quantity of a mineral resource anywhere within the roadless area has yet to be proven, and the area appears to lie outside the geological bounds of the nearby Eureka Mining District.

The Handies Peak portion of the area is largely either near or above timberline, resulting in low tree-growth rates. If harvested, 58,000 board-feet could be obtained annually, but BLM has no interest in attempting to manage the area for intensive timber harvest. In the southern end of the area on the flanks of Pole Creek Mountain, the commercial grade timber in the 9,000 to 11,000-foot elevation range is located on steep, rocky slopes. The difficulty of access, combined with the remoteness from timber markets, has prompted the Rio Grande National Forest to allocate the area to semi-primitive, non-motorized recreation and to prohibit timber sales.

Grazing is authorized over much of the area. Parts of Pole Creek Mountain are closed to domestic livestock for protection of the herd of bighorn sheep. No range



Hiker in the tundra. (Mark Pearson)

improvements are planned for the area.

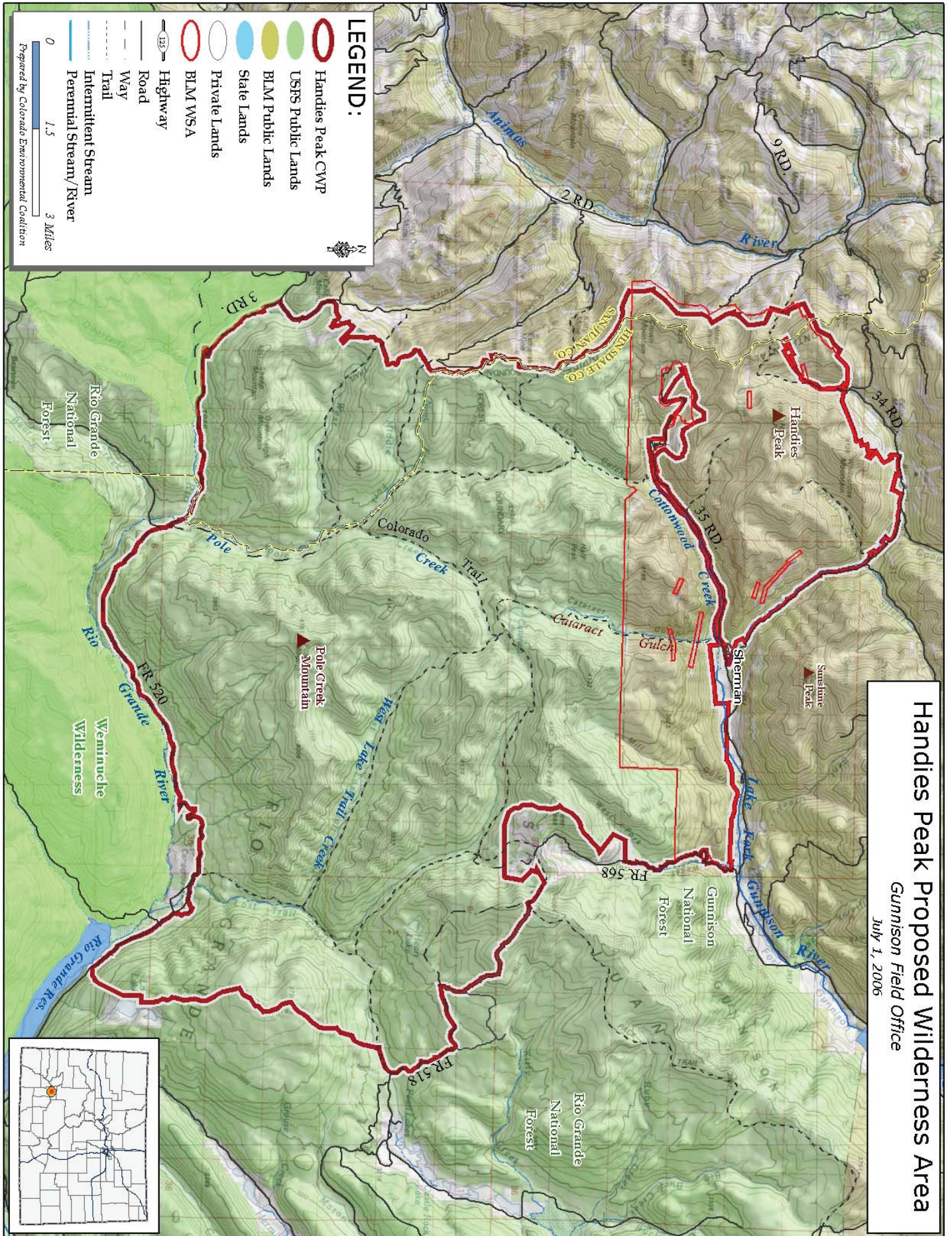
The state of Colorado owns the mineral rights to 920 acres within Handies Peak. There are also 172 acres of private, patented mining claims within the area. The BLM's portion of the area is closed to motorized vehicle use throughout the year. The Rio Grande National Forest allows motorcycles and ATV's on several trails within its portion of the area, including Pole Creek and West Lost Trail Creek, and permits snowmobiles during the winter.

Handies Peak is a headwaters area, but a ditch may exist within the area's extreme northeastern boundary near the Sherman town site.

Boundary Issues

Citizens propose the designation of the entire Handies Peak WSA plus an additional 55,500 acres of Forest Service lands adjacent to the Handies Peak WSA. The addition is bounded by the Rio Grande on the south, the Continental Divide on the west, and roads to Heart Lake and along Wager Gulch to the east.

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Handies Peak Proposed Wilderness Area
 Gunnison Field Office
 July 1, 2006