

# Colorado's Canyon Country Wilderness Proposal

## San Miguel River

The Norwood Canyon stretch of the San Miguel River passes through a pristine section below the Cascabel Ranch down to Horsefly Creek. The river is graced with lively rapids, spruce and ponderosa groves and abundant wildlife. It is a valuable resource, and important to protect as one of the only relatively free-flowing rivers in Colorado.

Leigh Sullivan, Telluride

**Citizens Wilderness Proposal:** 13,288 acres  
**BLM Wilderness Study Area:** not studied  
**BLM Field Office:** Uncompahgre Field Office  
**Location:** The proposed San Miguel River Wilderness is located northwest of Telluride and southeast of Naturita along the San Miguel River.

### Wilderness Qualities

The San Miguel River watershed is one of the wildest and most scenic landscapes in the world, a rare and fragile combination of intact and vital ecosystems and natural beauty. At the heart of the one million-acre watershed, the untamed San Miguel River flows for 72 miles from its high alpine headwaters above Telluride to its desert confluence with the Dolores River. Due to heavy use and increased development pressure, 38 miles of this corridor, plus 133 miles of tributary streams, are managed as a Special Management Area and as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern.

In a study completed in 1986 for the The Nature Conservancy and the Colorado Natural Heritage Program, the riparian system of the San Miguel Watershed was determined to be one of the two most important river systems in Colorado for protection. Within the riparian zones surrounding the river and its tributaries, willows and box-elders, quaking aspens, bittercress, and a variety of sedges flourish, providing important forage for elk and white-tailed deer, as well as shelter and nesting sites for a number of bird, reptile, and amphibian species. Upstream of Horsefly Creek, Colorado blue spruce, narrowleaf cottonwood, Douglas-fir, thin leaf alder, water birch, and red osier dogwood grace the banks of the river.

This is the only western Colorado riparian woodland with water birch as a major component. In The Nature Conservancy's Middle San Miguel Preserve, located downstream of Specie Creek, remnant or

relic sites, which are defined as plant communities that remain essentially untouched by human activity and retain all of their original floral components and characteristics.

Along the river are stands of stately, old-growth ponderosa pines in classic park-like settings. Throughout the watershed, mountain lions and coyotes prowl the mesas and canyons, while redtail hawks and golden eagles roost in the trees and cliffs. During the winter months, bald eagles are present, with two communal roost areas within the boundaries of the proposed wilderness area.

The stream system hosts a number of game and nongame fish, including rainbow, brown, brook, and cutthroat trout, and suckers, shiners, sculpins, and minnows, respectively, providing excellent opportunities for fishing and an important food source for many of the areas bird species. Enhancing



Rafters enjoy a float down the San Miguel River. (Jeff Widen)

this abundance are numerous sites of historical and archaeological significance, most notably unhatched dinosaur eggs discovered in 2000.

River otters reintroduced to the Dolores River in 1988 have since expanded their range and made their way far up the San Miguel River. Otters are routinely seen in the lower segments of the proposed wilderness.

The San Miguel River offers continuous Class II and occasional Class III rapids throughout the length of the wilderness. For 2001, BLM reported approximately 3,362 recreational user days (782 private/2,580 commercial) on the San Miguel River, much of which occurs through Norwood Canyon within the CWP unit. BLM has designated six river campsites in the river corridor for overnight use.

## Resource Information

Eighteen grazing allotments, totaling 873 AUMs, cover the area; only one of these qualifies as a high priority for intensive management. Two allotments, Horsefly Common and Uncompahgre Common, are grazed in conjunction with allotments in the Uncompahgre National Forest. Most of the allotments consist of large acreage with a small preference that averages 48.5 AUMs per allotment. The steep slopes and rugged ridgelines of the area force livestock to graze along the mesa tops or in the riparian zones of the canyon bottoms, leaving much of the allotment acreage untouched.

Three commercially valuable forest stands have been identified within the area, consisting of three hundred twenty-five acres of pinyon-juniper woodland on the mesa top near the San Miguel River-Beaver Creek confluence and two ponderosa pine forests at the top of the mesa near the Goodenough Gulch confluence. Aside from these commercial timber resources, the primary uses for the remainder of the forest include Christmas trees, wildling transplants, posts, poles, firewood, and pinyon nut collection.

Despite a number of exploratory oil and gas wells, no production has ever occurred in the area. At present, the entire area is open to oil and gas leasing, with seasonal stipulations imposed for wintering eagles and big game animals. Coal production potential is rated low by the BLM, and geothermal has a low to moderate production potential rating.



The San Miguel River offers world-class rapids throughout the length of the CWP.

There are approximately 116 mining claims within the boundaries of the unit, and the entire unit, with the exception of the land acquired in the Carsten's exchange, is open to the staking of mining claims under the 1872 Mining Law. The BLM rates the area as having low to moderate potential for locatable minerals, and the only active mining that occurs today is by weekend recreational miners who use small suction dredges to recover "flour" gold from the San Miguel River sediments.

The river corridor and the heart of the wilderness proposal is closed to motorized vehicles.

The heart of the area is the San Miguel River. The Colorado Water Conservation Board holds instream water rights for up to 91 cfs during summer months. There are numerous private water rights located upstream of the proposed wilderness.

## Boundary Issues

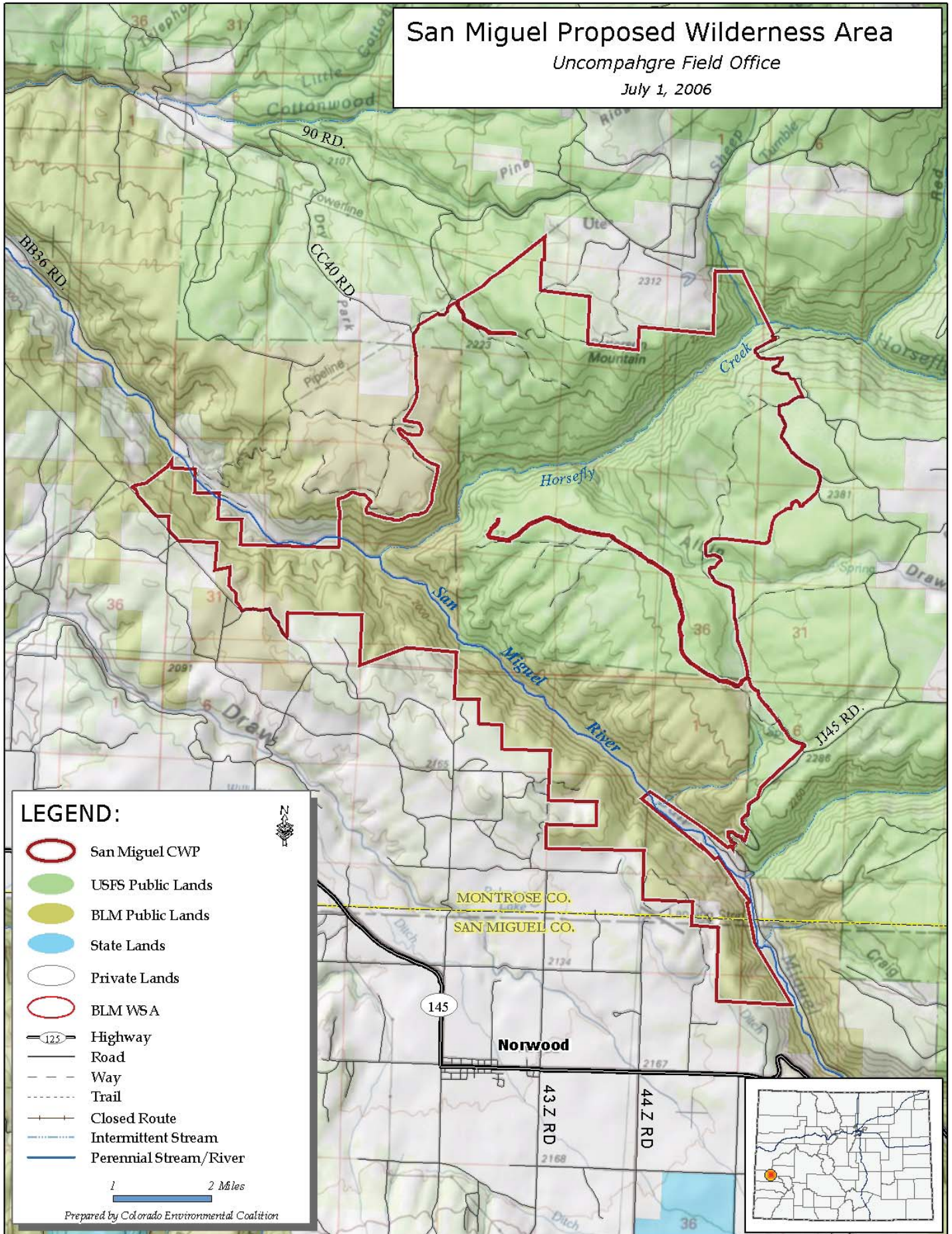
Four miles of the river, as well as four miles of one of its tributaries, were excluded from the original wilderness inventories of BLM and Forest Service in the 1970s because San Miguel River is split between Forest Service and BLM jurisdictions. Individually, these jurisdictions were considered too small to qualify for wilderness. However, considered as part of the entire watershed, these areas result in a roadless area over 13,000 acres in size.

The CWP consists primarily of the San Miguel River canyon itself and a major tributary canyon, Horsefly Creek. The area's boundary is drawn largely along canyon rims and private property boundaries.














## San Miguel Proposed Wilderness Area

Uncompahgre Field Office

July 1, 2006



### LEGEND:

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

1 2 Miles

Prepared by Colorado Environmental Coalition