

# Colorado's Canyon Country Wilderness Proposal

## Snaggletooth

Camping amidst towering, ancient ponderosas next to the Dolores River's sparkling current ranks among the most sublime wilderness experiences in Colorado. These stands hold some of the last and best timeless, grandfather trees remaining on the Colorado Plateau.

Mark Pearson, Durango

**Citizens Wilderness Proposal:** 32,050 acres  
**BLM Wilderness Study Area:** not studied  
**BLM Field Office:** San Juan Field Office (Durango)  
**Location:** Snaggletooth is located six miles east of Dove Creek and about 25 miles north of Cortez in Dolores and San Miguel counties.

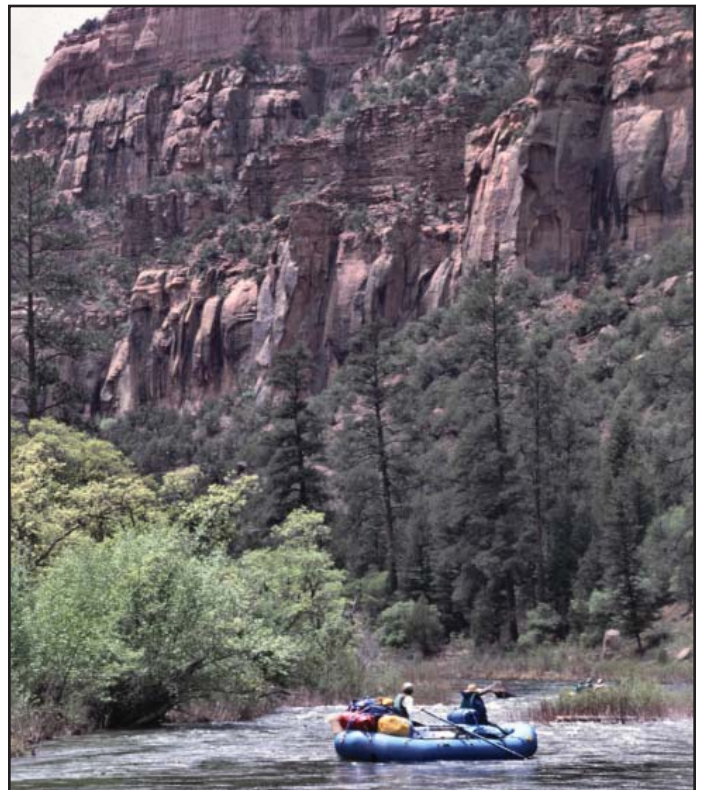
### Wilderness Qualities

The proposed Snaggletooth Wilderness comprises 31,684 acres of BLM and San Juan National Forest lands split into two units by a powerline. The northern unit encompasses approximately 18,000 acres and the southern unit roughly 14,000 acres. The proposed Snaggletooth Wilderness is named for a rapid in the Dolores River which runs through the unit.

Snaggletooth contains the renowned Ponderosa Gorge of the Dolores River. The gorge provides one of the West's most exquisite wilderness adventures – a quick-paced float on an icy cold mountain river past cathedral stands of ancient, yellow-barked ponderosa pines. Spectacular campsites present themselves mile and after mile, grassy parks amidst towering ponderosa giants. Soaring cliffs of brilliant red Wingate sandstone provide a fitting background to this incredible wilderness setting.

Snaggletooth covers 30 river miles from the popular Bradfield Bridge raft launch downstream past fearsome Snaggletooth Rapid. This segment is at once among both the most cherished and rarest wilderness river floats in the Southwest-cherished because of the serene beauty of the Ponderosa Gorge, and rare because often the short boating season further complicated by the operation of McPhee Reservoir and vast irrigation diversions. The boating season typically runs for a few weeks in May, usually bracketing the Memorial Day weekend. Depending on snowpack and runoff, some years the boating season can begin as early as mid-April and extend as late as mid-June. While the Ponderosa Gorge is breathtaking

in its beauty, the river below the great "u"-turn at Mountain Sheep Point offers charms of a different sort. The river corridor here begins its transformation from mountain stream to desert river. The corridor vegetation grows progressively sparser and drier, with box elders and the omnipresent non-native tamarisk taking hold instead. Pinyon-juniper woodland rather than ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir dominate the higher canyon slopes. The ponderosa forest, dense at the Bradfield Bridge boat launch on the wilderness area's upper boundary, thins dramatically below the Dove Creek Pump Station boat launch and is replaced by overhanging clumps of box elder which offer refreshingly cool and secluded campsites for river runners. The Forest Service component consists largely of the rugged eastern tributary canyons, and



BLM estimates more than 12,500 visitor days annually during the typically brief snowmelt period during May and June.  
(Jeff Widen)

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the sloping tablelands above these canyons dominated by ponderosa-pine forest.

The river's great recreational appeal has led BLM to manage the canyon as part of the Dolores River Special Recreation Management Area. BLM estimates more than 12,500 visitor days annually during the typically brief snowmelt period during May and June.

The Dolores River through the proposed wilderness was studied and recommended for designation under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act in 1976. The recommendation was forwarded to Congress, but no congressional action has been taken. A temporary mineral withdrawal associated with the Wild and Scenic study expired in 1981 leaving the river corridor susceptible to road construction, mining, and other activities incompatible with the river's extraordinary scenic and recreational values.

River otters were reintroduced to the Dolores River by the Colorado Division of Wildlife and now thrive. Other wildlife in the corridor includes mule deer, black bear, mountain lion, and numerous raptors.

Boaters enjoy the area's significant cultural resources, including an intact cliff dwelling located just upstream from the Dove Creek pump station. This dwelling and numerous other Anasazi features make the area important for future research focused upon understanding prehistoric cultures. Just upstream, McPhee Reservoir inundated vast areas of prehistoric dwellings.

## Resource Information

Mineral leasing is restricted to no surface occupancy within the river corridor. Potential exists for carbon dioxide and natural gas deposits, although topography limits access to the extreme boundaries of the proposed wilderness.

The river corridor is closed to livestock grazing. One livestock allotment does exist on the national forest lands above the rim. No range developments are planned.

The river corridor within the proposed wilderness is closed to motorized vehicles.

The San Juan National Forest currently manages its portion of the proposed wilderness for non-motorized recreation, wildlife winter range, and livestock grazing.



Soaring Wingate sandstone along the Dolores River. (Mark Pearson)

Ponderosa pine forest offers timber management possibilities in pockets on the plateau, but active timber sales are excluded inside the boundary.

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 as well as recreational whitewater boating. The CWCB holds an instream flow right for approximately 70 cfs during summer.

## Boundary Issues

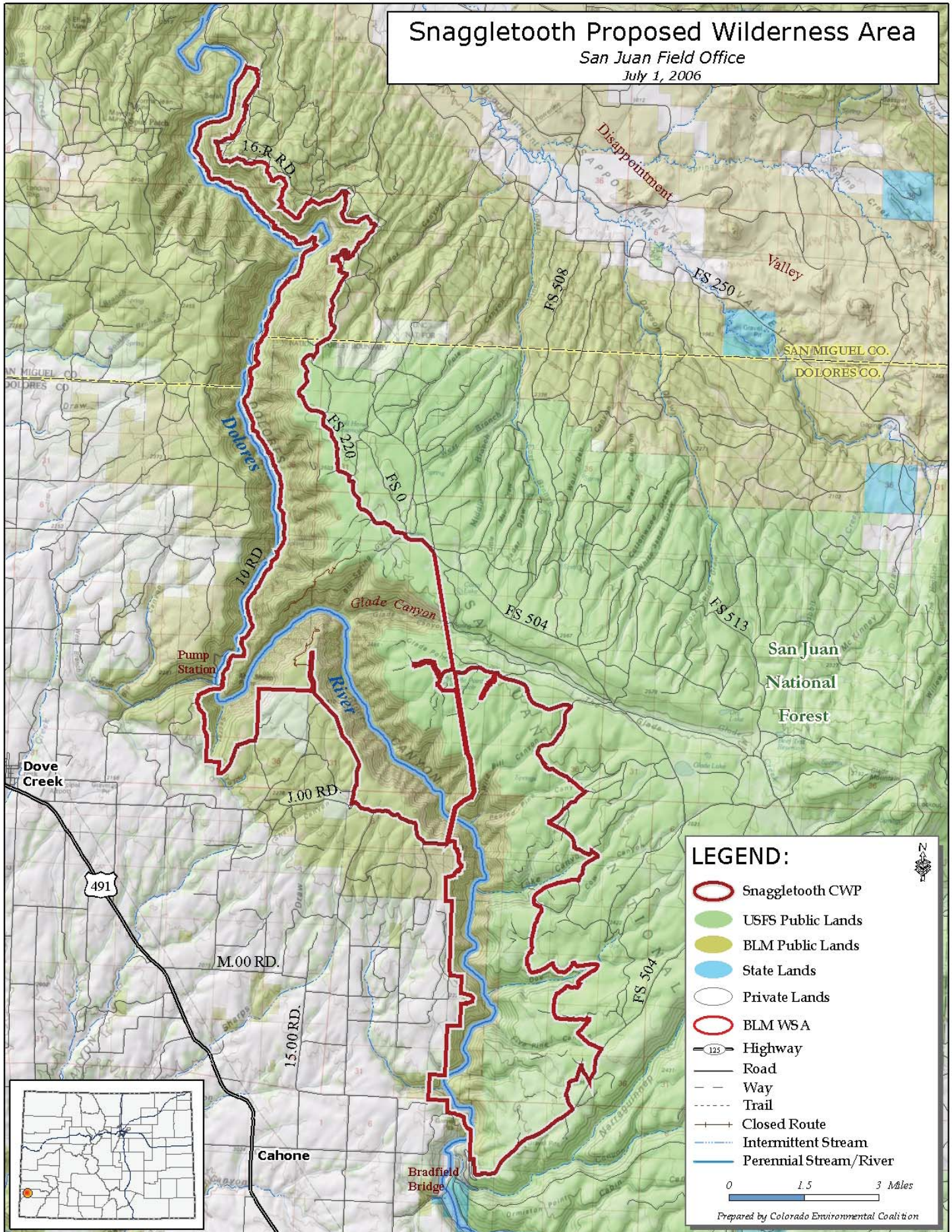
Approximately 12,221 acres of the proposed wilderness are administered by the San Juan National Forest; the remaining 19,427 acres are managed by BLM. The Snaggletooth unit was never inventoried for its wilderness potential previously because the Dolores River Canyon below Bradfield Bridge consisted of alternating, intermingled BLM and Forest Service jurisdiction up until 1983. Congress enacted Public Law 98-141 in 1983 to modify boundaries of the San Juan National Forest. In brief, the Forest Service transferred 22,717 acres below Bradfield Bridge to the BLM, while BLM transferred 4,124 acres above Bradfield Bridge to the Forest Service.

The canyon rim defines the boundary on the west between Bradfield Bridge and the Dove Creek Pump Station. Downstream of the pump station, the river road on the west bank defines the boundary. The eastern boundary, which lies along, is drawn along forest access roads and old timber sales.

## Snaggletooth Proposed Wilderness Area

San Juan Field Office

July 1, 2006



### LEGEND:

- Snaggletooth 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 1.5 3 Miles

Prepared by Colorado Environmental Coalition