

Colorado's Canyon Country Wilderness Proposal

Weber-Menefee

Hiking in the Menefee mountain area in April, we were slowly descending Joe's Canyon and surprised two wild turkeys. Black bear prints covered the bottom of the canyon and a horny toad scrambled to safety as we doubled back to our starting point. This quiet canyon was absolutely alive with springtime activity, a hidden haven for wildlife in the southwest!

Kathryn Goldman, Durango

Citizens Wilderness Proposal: 14,598 acres
BLM Wilderness Study Area: 13,392 acres
BLM Field Office: San Juan Field Office (Durango)
Location: Weber and Menefee Mountains are located in Montezuma County, approximately 20 miles east of Cortez and adjacent to Mesa Verde National Park.

Wilderness Qualities

Weber and Menefee Mountains provide important undisturbed wildlife habitat amidst the developed ranches and farms of the Mancos Valley. The two mountains are prominent buttes, rising from 6,500 to over 8,200 feet, capped with resistant Point Lookout Sandstone that forms sheer cliffs. These cliffs, combined with dense vegetation, create an almost impenetrable solitude in the area. Around the mountains, farming and ranching have cleared the land, leaving only the mountains with good vegetative cover. This cover consists of pinyon-juniper woodlands, oakbrush, and mountain mahogany with scattered stands of Douglas fir and ponderosa pine above 7,000 feet.

Mule deer herds migrate along the bottom slopes of the mountains for winter range. Weber Mountain, along with adjacent Menefee Mountain, offers a valuable refuge with ridgetops that blow free of snow and protective valleys between. Deer can migrate to the lower, warmer lands of the Ute Indian Reservation to the south. A small herd of bighorn sheep, originally introduced into adjacent Mesa Verde National Park in 1946, frequents Weber Mountain. High concentrations of black bears and mountain lions, perhaps moving out from the un hunted populations in neighboring Mesa Verde National Park, inhabit the area.

Rare Mexican spotted owl nest in adjacent Mesa Verde National Park that has been observed on the adjacent Ute Reservation. At least six pairs of golden eagles reside in the WSAs and bald eagles hunt there as well.

Weber Mountain and Menefee Mountain offer wonderful opportunities for solitude, fine scenery, and backcountry recreation in close proximity to Mesa Verde National Park. The ruggedness of the area creates prime opportunities for hiking, backpacking, and climbing, and the cliff tops offer dramatic vantage points for sight-seeing and photography. The existing Mesa Verde Wilderness is closed to recreational use, as is all of the backcountry in Mesa Verde, in order to protect the archaeological sites in the National Park. Designation of the Weber-Menefee Mountains Wilderness immediately next door to Mesa Verde will lessen the demands upon Mesa Verde park managers for backcountry use and will provide those managers with an obvious recommendation for visitors desiring primitive-type recreation. Weber Mountain is the most prominent feature visible from the main entrance road into the park as it climbs up the cliffside to the mesa top. Wilderness designation will ensure that this view is not despoiled for park visitors.



Weber and Menefee Mountains provide important undisturbed wildlife habitat amidst the developed ranches and farms of the Mancos Valley. (Mark Pearson)

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BLM recommended the two mountains for administrative designation as primitive areas in 1972. Though never officially designated as such, the mountains have since been managed to protect their primitive values.

Resource Information

There are no mining claims for locatable minerals within either Weber Mountain or Menefee Mountain WSAs, indicating low interest and potential for mineralization. All mineral leases have expired as well, and in 1984 BLM administratively placed much of the area in a no-surface-occupancy leasing category.

BLM considers both Weber and Menefee Mountains to have poor economic potential for coal development even though they technically lie within the Durango Known Recoverable Coal Resource Area.

BLM has administratively placed Weber and Menefee Mountains in a no-coal-leasing category due to the ruggedness of the area and the importance of safeguarding the area's wildlife and recreation resources.

Portions of six grazing allotments lie within the two areas, and the authorized grazing level is minimal. Most of the area, about 8,700 acres, is closed to motorized vehicle use. There are no productive stands of timber or woodlands.

Weber-Menefee Mountains is essentially a headwaters area, although a portion of Weber Canyon slices through a tiny corner of the area's southeast boundary.



The ruggedness of Weber-Menefee CWP creates prime opportunities for hiking, backpacking, and climbing. (Mark Pearson)

Boundary Issues

The wilderness proposed by citizens is the same as BLM's Wilderness Study Area boundaries for the two mountains, plus the addition of state lands on the southwest side of Weber Mountain and on the west side of Menefee Mountain. The total acreage includes, in addition to the BLM land, 1,020 acres of Colorado state lands, 120 acres of privately-owned mineral estate (of which Montezuma County owns 80 acres) and 40 acres of private land.

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