



Colorado's Canyon Country Wilderness Proposal

West Elk Addition

The gentle hike out to the Dillon Pinnacles – remnants of an ancient volcano that once existed deep in the heart of the West Elk Mountains – has a serene cathedral atmosphere, being bounded on one side by the pinnacles and the other by the expanse of Blue Mesa Lake. It is absolutely appropriate that this area be included in the West Elk Wilderness for its geologic attributes alone.

Mary Anne Farr, Gunnison

Citizens Wilderness Proposal: 6,878 acres
BLM Wilderness Study Area: not studied
BLM Field Office: Gunnison Field Office
Location: About 15 miles west of Gunnison, the proposed addition to the West Elk Wilderness is located along Highway 50 on the shores of Blue Mesa Reservoir in Gunnison County .

Wilderness Qualities

Mesa grasslands grazed by wintering herds of deer and elk, majestic spires etching the blue skies of the Gunnison Basin, raptors soaring in thermals above Blue Mesa Reservoir and an easily accessible trail from U.S. Highway 50 make this unit a logical addition to the 176,100-acre West Elk Wilderness.

Few wilderness areas share what this one provides in terms of easy access to the general public and proximity to one of Colorado's leading recreational destinations – Curecanti National Recreation Area – a major facility with several campgrounds, three reservoirs, numerous trails and a commercial marina.

Highway 50 is a designated portion of the West Elk Loop Scenic Byway.

A wide diversity of landforms and vegetation defines the proposed unit. The most stunning topographical feature is the volcanic breccia towers of the Dillon Pinnacles, where an existing nature trail leads directly from the highway and offers visitors a short, easy, and highly scenic hike. Flora include a variety of ecosystems, from sage shrublands suitable for antelope, to ponderosa, aspen, and pinyon woodlands where deer and elk find shelter during the often sub-zero winters in the Gunnison Basin, an area that records some of the lowest temperatures in the continental U.S.

This proposed wilderness addition would create a continuous wilderness from US Highway 50 north almost to the Kebler Pass road, a distance of over 20 miles, all connected by a network of hiking trails that stretch to Crested Butte, Paonia, and the Ohio Creek Valley north of Gunnison. Opportunities for wilderness immersion and solitude are high.

The West Elk Addition provides excellent opportunities for big game hunting. Fishing and boating are also popular along the shores of Blue Mesa, a 20-mile-long reservoir that makes up the southern boundary of the unit. The Dillon Pinnacles provide a fascinating geologic study area that describes part of the tremendous volcanic activity that created the West Elk Range 30 million years ago.

Resource Information

Grazing on this BLM unit has been closed since 1985. The allotments on the National Forest portions of the area have been vacant since the 1980s.

There are no right-of-ways or oil and gas leases.

No commercial quantities of minerals, timber or other viable commercial resources are found in the proposed wilderness addition.

Human activity is generally limited to hiking and hunting.

This addition to the West Elk Wilderness is primarily a headwaters area downstream from the existing wilderness area.

Boundary Issues

The BLM recently acquired private property that allows for the boundary to be drawn along West Elk Creek. About 3,800 acres of the CWP area, or a little more than half, consists of BLM lands. The remainder of the area is split between Gunnison National Forest (1,400 acres) and Colorado Division of Wildlife (900 acres).

The northern boundary is contiguous with the West Elk Wilderness boundary. The eastern boundary follows a Forest Service access road, #723. The southern boundary is Highway 50 and Blue Mesa Reservoir. The western boundary follows Blue Mesa Reservoir and West Elk Creek.



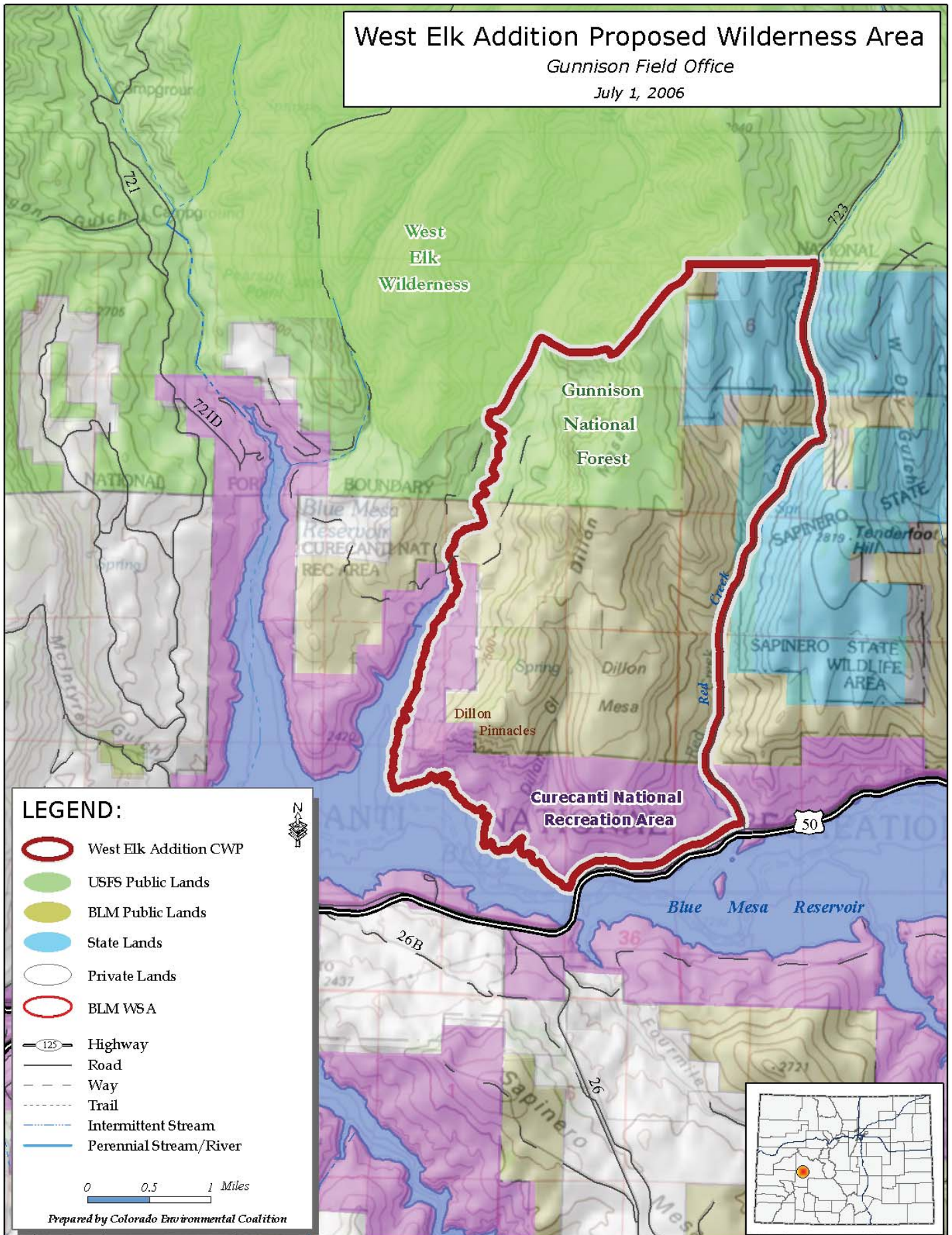
The Dillon Pinnacles provide a fascinating geologic study area. (Kurt Kunkle)

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West Elk Addition Proposed Wilderness Area

Gunnison Field Office

July 1, 2006



LEGEND:

- West Elk Addition CWP
- USFS Public Lands
- BLM Public Lands
- State Lands
- Private Lands
- BLM WSA
- Highway
- Road
- Way
- Trail
- Intermittent Stream
- Perennial Stream/River

0 0.5 1 Miles

Prepared by Colorado Environmental Coalition