

Colorado's Canyon Country Wilderness Proposal

Yampa River

The Yampa River is beautiful, scenic. Look up from the water at the cliffs and you can almost imagine an Indian staring down at you. Such wilderness areas are very wild, very pristine, and the views are incredible.

Steve Henderson, Steamboat Springs

Citizens Wilderness Proposal: 12,436 acres
BLM Wilderness Study Area: 9,661 acres
BLM Field Office: Little Snake Field (Craig)
Location: The proposed Yampa River wilderness lies 15 miles southwest of Craig in Moffat County.

Wilderness Qualities

Many consider the Yampa River the least impacted of Colorado's mighty rivers. Dinosaur National Monument protects the downstream portions while the Flat Tops Wilderness protects the headwaters.

The proposed Yampa River Wilderness will complete this sampling of Yampa ecosystems by offering similar protection to a segment of the Yampa midway along its course through the rangelands of northwest Colorado.

The proposed wilderness includes a 17-mile stretch of the Yampa west of Milk Creek as it meanders past Duffy Mountain. BLM manages the main area as the Little Yampa/Juniper Canyon Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA) for rafting, canoeing, camping, and hunting. As an SRMA, the area receives more frequent patrolling, and special attention for visual qualities and for public access. BLM has begun a required study to evaluate the Yampa's freeflowing characteristics and outstanding flatwater recreation for potential addition to the federal Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

River travel is a popular means of exploring the Yampa River's wilderness. A largely unaltered riparian ecosystem lines the river banks, with the cottonwoods in several large parks offering shade and seclusion to visitors. From atop Duffy Mountain, a visitor has views northeast to Craig and west towards Juniper Canyon where the Yampa wends its way through rich agricultural land.

Extensive wildlife populations include dozens of bald

eagles wintering along the river, and large numbers of deer and elk foraging on the area's critical winter range. Brood rearing grounds for grouse are found in rolling sagebrush steppe along the area's southwestern edge, and hikers and boaters frequently spy pronghorns along the hillsides flanking the river. This segment of the Yampa contains critical habitat for the endangered pikeminnow as well.



The winding Yampa River. (Mark Pearson)

Resource Information

No oil and gas leases exist within the proposed wilderness, and BLM management identifies Yampa River as an area for no-surface-occupancy leasing in the future. No hardrock mining claims occur within the area, and there are no surface coal leases in the area.

Portions of five grazing allotments fall within the proposed wilderness boundary. Grazing occurs throughout the year for both sheep and cattle. A number of minor range improvements can be found in the area, but these stock ponds and fences are neither abundant nor overly obtrusive.

Recreational vehicle use is restricted to designated routes within the proposed wilderness, with the result there is little such use.

The Yampa River flows through the proposed wilderness for more than ten miles, and includes that portion of the river that would be inundated by the potential Juniper Mountain dam. Most observers believe the presence of endangered species makes the likelihood of the dam's approval extremely remote.

The USFWS has designated this reach of the river as critical habitat for the endangered Pike Minnow. The holder of the proposed dam's water rights, the Colorado River Water Conservation District, has explored moving its water rights to other off-stream sites on tributaries. A dozen or so adjudicated water rights occur within the area. The Duffy Tunnel diversion is intentionally excluded from the western wilderness boundary to avoid conflict with those water rights.



A largely unaltered riparian ecosystem lines the river banks. (Mark Pearson)

Boundary Issues

The proposed wilderness boundary has been drawn to exclude nonconforming uses such as power lines, access roads, water diversion structures, and obvious range improvements. In addition to 12,000 acres of BLM land, there are two private parcels totaling 320 acres along the Yampa River and a section of state land in the northwest corner.

The northern boundary and western boundaries are defined by the BLM/private land boundary, and the eastern boundary generally follows power lines on the eastern end of Duffy Mountain. The southern boundary is defined by the Duffy Mountain Road and Moffat County Road #17 to a point approximately where the Duffy Tunnel intersects the Yampa River.

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Yampa River Proposed Wilderness Area

Little Snake Field Office

July 1, 2006

