

Appendix M

Wilderness Inventory

Appendix M: Wilderness Inventory

Introduction

A National Wilderness Preservation System composed of federally owned areas designated by Congress as “wilderness areas” has been created as a result of the passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964 (16 USC 1131-1136, 78 Stat. 890). The purpose of this Act is “to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.” Areas designated as wilderness are to be administered “for the use and enjoyment of the American people in such manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness, and so as to provide for the protection of these areas, the preservation of their wilderness character, and for the gathering and dissemination of information regarding their use and enjoyment as wilderness.” No Federal lands are to be designated as “wilderness areas” except as provided for in the Act.

Consistent with the intent of the Wilderness Act, wilderness reviews are a required element of CCPs and are conducted in accordance with the refuge planning process outlined in Section 602 FW 1 and 3 of the Service Manual, including public involvement and NEPA compliance. The three phases of the wilderness review are: 1) inventory, 2) study; and 3) recommendation.

If through the inventory process a determination is made that a Refuge or area on a Refuge meets the criteria for wilderness, the area, referred to as a wilderness study area (WSA), is further evaluated as part of the study phase. In the study phase, all values (e.g., ecological, recreational, cultural, economic, symbolic), resources (e.g., wildlife, water, vegetation, minerals, soils), public uses, and refuge management activities within the area are analyzed. This analysis also includes an evaluation of whether the WSA can be effectively managed to preserve its wilderness character. These elements are analyzed through the refuge planning process to determine the most appropriate management direction for the WSA.

The recommendation phase consists of forwarding or reporting recommendations for wilderness designation from the Director through the Secretary of the Interior and the President to Congress in a wilderness study report.

If the inventory does not identify any areas that meet the WSA criteria, these findings are documented in the administrative record for the CCP, fulfilling the planning requirement for a wilderness review. We inventoried the lands and waters within the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) Complex, including the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR and Coachella Valley NWR, and found no areas that meet the eligibility criteria for a WSA as defined by the Wilderness Act. This appendix summarizes the wilderness inventory for these Refuges.

Inventory Criteria

The wilderness inventory is a broad look at the planning area to identify wilderness study areas (WSAs). WSAs are roadless areas that meet the minimum criteria for wilderness identified in Section 2(c) of the Wilderness Act.

"A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions, and which: (1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable; (2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; (3) has at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; and (4) may also contain ecological, geological or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value."

A WSA must be a roadless area or island, meet the size criteria, appear natural, and provide outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive recreation. The process for identification of roadless areas and islands in the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR Complex and application of the wilderness criteria are described in the following sections.

Identification of Roadless Areas and Roadless Islands

Identification of roadless areas and roadless islands required gathering and evaluating land status maps, land use and road inventory data, and aerial photographs for the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR and the Coachella Valley NWR. "Roadless" refers to the absence of improved roads suitable and maintained for public travel by means of motorized vehicles primarily intended for highway use.

Evaluation of the Size Criteria

Roadless areas or roadless islands meet the size criteria if any one of the following standards applies:

- An area with over 5,000 contiguous acres. State and private lands are not included in making this acreage determination.
- A roadless island of any size. A roadless island is defined as an area surrounded by permanent waters or that is markedly distinguished from the surrounding lands by topographical or ecological features.
- An area of less than 5,000 contiguous Federal acres that is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition, and of a size suitable for wilderness management.
- An area of less than 5,000 contiguous Federal acres that is contiguous with a designated wilderness, recommended wilderness, or area under wilderness review by another Federal wilderness managing agency such as the Forest Service, National Park Service, or Bureau of Land Management.

Evaluation of the Naturalness Criteria

In addition to being roadless, a WSA must meet the naturalness criteria. Section 2(c) defines wilderness as an area that "... generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable." The area must appear natural to the average visitor rather than "pristine." The presence of historic landscape conditions is not required. An area may include some human impacts provided they are substantially unnoticeable in the unit as a whole. Significant human-caused hazards, such as the presence of unexploded ordnance from military activity, and the physical impacts of refuge management facilities and activities are also considered in evaluation of the naturalness criteria. An area may not be considered unnatural in appearance solely on the basis of the "sights and sounds" of human impacts and activities outside the boundary of the unit.

Evaluation of Outstanding Opportunities for Solitude or Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

In addition to meeting the size and naturalness criteria, a WSA must provide outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive recreation. The area does not have to possess outstanding opportunities for both solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation, and does not need to have outstanding opportunities on every acre. Further, an area does not have to be open to public use and access to qualify under this criteria; Congress has designated a number of wilderness areas in the Refuge System that are closed to public access to protect resource values.

Opportunities for solitude refer to the ability of a visitor to be alone and secluded from other visitors in the area. Primitive and unconfined recreation means non-motorized, dispersed outdoor recreation activities that are compatible and do not require developed facilities or mechanical transport. These primitive recreation activities may provide opportunities to experience challenge and risk; self-reliance; and adventure.

These two "opportunity elements" are not well defined by the Wilderness Act but, in most cases, can be expected to occur together. However, an outstanding opportunity for solitude may be present in an area offering only limited primitive recreation potential. Conversely, an area may be so attractive for recreation use that experiencing solitude is not an option.

Evaluation of Supplemental Values

Supplemental values are defined by the Wilderness Act as "...ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historic value." These values are not required for wilderness but their presence should be documented.

Inventory Findings

SONNY BONO SALTON SEA NWR

As documented below, the lands and waters within the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR do not meet the criteria for a WSA.

Roadless Areas and Roadless Islands. The majority of the 37,660-acre Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR (approximately 32,410 acres) consists of the open waters of the Salton Sea. Uses permitted in the Sea include motorized and non-motorized boating activities. Boating occurs much less frequently than it did in the past due to ever increasing salinity levels in the Sea, but it does continue at limited levels. Such uses are inconsistent with wilderness values. The remainder of the Refuge, encompassing approximately 5,250 acres of non-contiguous parcels, include a combination of leased and fee-title lands. These areas, which are located to the south of the Salton Sea, include a combination of unpaved public access roads and restricted access farm roads.

Size Criteria. The Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR consists of several distinct components, including approximately 32,410 acres of the Salton Sea, which are owned in fee title by the Federal government, approximately 3,835 acres located near the mouth of the New River, and approximately 1,415 acres located near the mouth of the Alamo River. The latter two areas include a combination of leased and fee title lands. There are no islands of any significant size included within the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR.

Naturalness Criteria. There are only a few small areas of land within the boundaries of the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR that could be described as lacking the imprint of man's work. Sea walls have been constructed along some portions of the southern edge of the Salton Sea, much of the land to the south of the Salton Sea has been farmed for decades, many of the habitat areas present on the Refuge require mechanical manipulation (e.g., tilling, clearing, pumping of water), and drainage and irrigation channels extend through the upland portions of the Refuge.

Outstanding Opportunities for Solitude or Primitive and Unconfined Recreation. Opportunities to experience solitude are available within the portion of the Refuge that includes the Salton Sea. However, because motorized boating activity is permitted in the Salton Sea, such opportunities could be disrupted.

Supplemental Values. The open waters of the Salton Sea that are included within the Refuge provide significant scenic value. In addition, the natural and managed habitats within the Refuge provide significant ecological benefits to wildlife, and outstanding opportunities for wildlife observation.

Inventory Findings

COACHELLA VALLEY NWR

As documented below, the lands within the Coachella Valley NWR do not meet the criteria for a WSA.

Roadless Areas and Roadless Islands. The Coachella Valley NWR includes a few dirt roadways that were used prior to Refuge establishment, however, none of the roads are currently in use. Public roads do extend along much of the Refuge's perimeter.

Size Criteria. The Coachella Valley NWR consists of approximately 3,577 acres, which does not meet the size criteria for wilderness. No islands are included within the Coachella Valley NWR.

Naturalness Criteria. The Refuge protects significant sand dune and sand field habitat that historically characterized a large portion of the Coachella Valley. However, to continue to support this habitat, sand fences have been constructed throughout the southeastern portion of the Refuge. In addition, about 400 acres of the site was cultivated in the past and the scars of past disturbance are still visible today.

Outstanding Opportunities for Solitude or Primitive and Unconfined Recreation. The area around the Coachella Valley NWR, particularly to the east and south, supports urban development. Interstate 10 is located just a few miles to the south and a regional electrical transmission corridor extends along a portion of the Refuge. Although the Refuge can provide opportunities for escape from the urban environment, the sights and sounds of urbanization are often apparent within the Refuge boundary.

Supplemental Values. The Coachella Valley NWR protects regionally significant blowsand habitat and many species endemic to this habitat, including two federally listed species. These habitats have important scientific value, as well as important ecological value.

Conclusions

The lands and waters within the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR Complex do not meet the minimum criteria for wilderness as identified in Section 2(c) of the Wilderness Act. No further analysis related to wilderness issues is therefore required.