

Panoche Hills South

CA-040-301B

PANOCHIE HILLS SOUTH WILDERNESS STUDY AREA (WSA)

(CA-040-301B)

1. THE STUDY AREA --- 11,305 acres

The Panoche Hills South WSA is located in the northwestern portion of Fresno County. It is located within the Coast Range of central California, approximately 30 miles south of Los Banos. The WSA includes 11,229 acres of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land and a private inholding totaling 76 acres (see Map 1 and Table 1).

The WSA is bounded on the northwest by a livestock management road (which separates this unit from the Panoche Hills South WSA (CA-040-301B)) on the west by the Panoche access road and private land, on the south and east by private land, and on the extreme north by a livestock management road.

The WSA is located just west of the San Joaquin Valley and includes very steep rugged terrain accentuated by intermittent drainages. Elevations vary from approximately 700 to 2,500 feet above sea level. Vegetation within the WSA is primarily annual grasses and forbs interspersed with low-growing shrubs of the California Steppe ecosystem. A few junipers and yucca occur at higher elevations.

The WSA lies within the Panoche National Cooperative Land and Wildlife Management Area (NCLWMA) established on August 11, 1961 by Public Land Order No. 2460. The NCLWMA is cooperatively managed with the California Department of Fish and Game (CDF&G), and is managed under current public land laws. Additionally, the eastern edge of the WSA lies within portions of two Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) - the Moreno Paleontological ACEC and the Panoche/Coalinga Rare, Threatened and Endangered (RTE) ACEC. The former was established to protect significant paleontological resources and sensitive plants and the latter to protect RTE animal species. Both ACECs were designated by the Hollister Resource Management Plan (RMP) in 1984.

The WSA was studied under Section 603 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA). Suitability recommendations were analyzed in the Draft and Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Central California Study Areas. A summary of the area's wilderness values was included in the Final EIS. Three different suitability recommendations were analyzed in the EIS: all wilderness, 50% partial wilderness and no wilderness.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE --- 0 acres recommended for wilderness
11,229 BLM acres recommended for nonwilderness

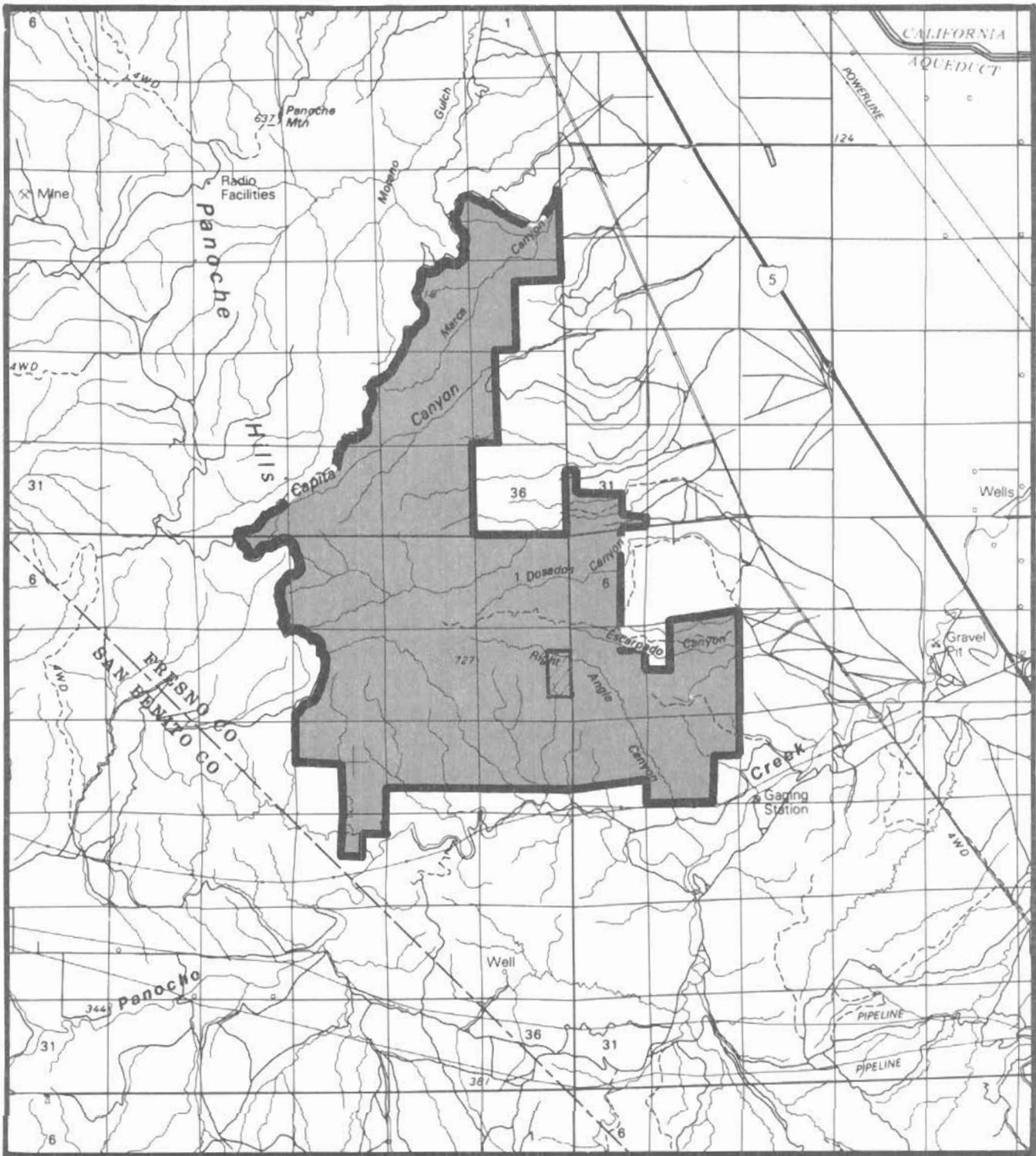
No wilderness is the recommendation for this WSA. The entire acreage in the WSA is released for uses other than wilderness. The all wilderness alternative is considered to be the environmentally preferred alternative as it would result in the least change from the natural environment over the long term. The no wilderness alternative will be implemented in a manner which will use all practical means to avoid or minimize environmental impacts.

The WSA is recommended nonsuitable for the following reasons: the moderate potential for oil and gas exploration and development, the low potential for diatomite, gypsite, marl, phosphate and uranium mineral deposits, and the continuance of the Panoche NCLWMA, outweigh the area's wilderness values. Effective management of the area as wilderness would be somewhat difficult.

The WSA lends itself to other resource uses. Under the Bureau's recommendation, this area will remain open for oil and gas exploration and development due to the moderate potential for the occurrence of oil and gas reserves in the WSA. In addition, the WSA has low potential for the occurrence of other mineral deposits mentioned above.

Being part of the Panoche NCLWMA, the area is managed in cooperation with the CDF&G for the benefit of wildlife resources. Both agencies have been involved in water developments which have improved the habitat for upland game species. Wilderness designation would constrain future management options including motorized vehicle access to install additional water developments and/or silt catchment basins.

The area's size combined with a lack of topographical or cultural features to delineate the boundaries would make managing the area as wilderness difficult. Extensive signing, and in specific cases, fencing of the boundaries would be necessary. There are approximately ten miles of routes of travel including primitive ways and other unmaintained routes of access which will remain available for vehicular use.

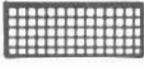


NONE

RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS



RECOMMENDED FOR NONWILDERNESS



LAND OUTSIDE WSA RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS



SPLIT ESTATE



STATE



PRIVATE

**Panoche Hills South
Proposal
MAP-1**



040-301B
JUNE, 1988

TABLE 1 - Land Status and Acreage Summary of the Study Area

<u>Within Wilderness Study Area</u>		<u>Acres</u>
BLM	(surface and subsurface)	11,229
Split Estate	(BLM surface only)	0
Inholdings		
State		0
Private		76
Total		<u>11,305</u>
<u>Within the Recommended Wilderness Study Boundary</u>		<u>Acres</u>
BLM	(within WSA)	0
BLM	(outside WSA)	0
Split Estate	(within WSA)	0
Split Estate	(outside WSA)	0
Total BLM Land Recommended for Wilderness		<u>0</u>
Inholdings		
State		0
Private		0
<u>Within the Area Not Recommended for Wilderness</u>		<u>Acres</u>
BLM	(surface and subsurface)	11,229
Split Estate	(BLM surface only)	0
Total BLM Land Not Recommended for Wilderness		<u>11,229</u>

3. CRITERIA CONSIDERED IN DEVELOPING THE WILDERNESS RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Wilderness Characteristics

1. Naturalness: The WSA has retained a high degree of natural character. The unit is characterized by steep, rugged terrain dissected by several deep drainages with slopes averaging 30 to 50 percent. Vegetation of the area is predominately Mediterranean annual grasses along with forbs and low shrubs, with juniper and yucca occurring at higher elevations.

The WSA remains relatively free from man's influence. Some OHV tracks and exploratory mining pits occur within the WSA. Improved springs and guzzlers for wildlife enhancement are located within the WSA. Most of these facilities are accessible by unimproved ways. These improvements and ways do not detract significantly from the naturalness of the WSA.

2. Solitude: The rugged terrain, the steep canyons and associated drainages provide outstanding opportunities for solitude. This opportunity is less near the perimeter of the WSA due to roads, communication towers, and/or views of Interstate 5.

This WSA is periodically overflowed by military aircraft as part of the national defense mission taking place in approved military operating areas and flight corridors. The visual intrusions and associated noise create periodic temporary effects on solitude which are deemed necessary and acceptable as a part of the defense preparedness of the nation.

3. Primitive and unconfined recreation: The area provides good opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreational pursuits common to a grassland community in steep, rugged terrain. These include hunting, hiking, and bird-watching. Annual game bird populations vary greatly from year to year with hunting activity varying accordingly. Extreme daytime summer temperatures restrict recreational opportunities during the dry season.
4. Special features: Four Endangered or sensitive animal species - the San Joaquin kit fox, the blunt-nosed leopard lizard, the giant kangaroo rat, and the San Joaquin antelope squirrel - occur in the area. An ACEC was established in the southeastern portion of the area in 1984 to protect the habitat of these species. The eastern portion of the WSA is part of one of the richest and most important fossil areas in California, and was designated an ACEC in 1984. This ACEC contains suitable habitat for the green fiddleneck - a sensitive plant species. In addition, the WSA contains Mediterranean annual grasses and shrubs of the California Steppe ecosystem.

B. Diversity in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS)

1. Assessing the diversity of natural systems and features as represented by ecosystems: This WSA contains 11,229 acres of the California Grasslands/California Steppe ecosystem. Wilderness designation of this WSA would add a new landform-ecosystem to the NWPS. The WSA's California Grassland Province-California Steppe landform-ecosystem is not currently represented in the NWPS.

Table 2 - Ecosystem Representation

Bailey-Kuchler Classification Domain/Province/PNV	<u>NWPS Areas</u>		<u>Other BLM Studies</u>	
	areas	acres	areas	acres
<u>NATIONWIDE</u>				
California Grassland/ California Steppes	0	0	2	18,024
<u>CALIFORNIA</u>				
California Grassland/ California Steppes	0	0	2	18,024

2. Expanding the opportunities for solitude or primitive recreation within a day's driving time (five hours) of major population centers: The WSA is within a five-hour drive of 17 major population centers. Table 3 summarizes the number and acreage of designated areas and other BLM study areas within a five-hour drive of these population centers.

Table 3 - Wilderness Opportunities for Residents of Major Population Centers

Population Centers	<u>NWPS Areas</u>		<u>Other BLM Studies</u>	
	areas	acres	areas	acres
<u>California</u>				
Bakersfield	32	4,071,358	128	3,998,548
Fresno	35	4,048,852	28	460,790
Los Angeles-				
Long Beach	27	2,876,234	135	4,958,751
Merced	33	3,957,550	25	348,753
Modesto	36	4,126,963	81	1,722,326
Oxnard-Ventura	23	2,195,198	85	2,703,260
Sacramento	46	5,001,817	87	2,479,541
Salinas-Seaside-				
Monterey	24	3,676,896	45	644,415
San Francisco-				
Oakland	39	4,473,002	39	565,614
San Jose	27	3,765,512	29	352,748
Santa Barbara-				
Santa Maria-Lompoc	20	1,166,142	35	528,590
Santa Cruz	27	3,765,512	32	407,890
Santa Rosa-Petaluma	10	888,579	12	134,167
Stockton	35	4,061,833	46	601,496
Vallejo-Napa-				
Fairfield	44	4,832,667	74	2,100,862
Visalia-Tulare-				
Porterville	34	4,431,635	61	1,681,921
Yuba City	44	4,951,805	85	2,459,500

3. Balancing the geographic distribution of wilderness areas: The Pinnacles Contiguous WSA is the only BLM WSA within 50 air miles recommended for partial-wilderness designation. The Pinnacles and the Ventana Wilderness Areas are located approximately 25 and 50 miles, respectively, southwest of the WSA. The former is managed by Pinnacles National Monument and the latter by the Los Padres National Forest.

C. Manageability

The Panoche Hills South WSA is manageable as wilderness, but only with difficulty. Manageability problems include the lack of natural barriers to vehicle use on existing ways and the small size of the WSA. Although closed to motorcycle use since 1970, there continues to be some trespass use due to the ease of access into the area. Frequent signing, fencing and patrolling along various segments of the border would be required to insure the integrity of the unit.

Military overflights in this WSA must be considered to maintain the integrity of the existing and future national defense mission as well as the wilderness resource.

D. Energy and Mineral Resource Values

1. Summary of information known at the time of the preliminary suitability recommendation: The geology and minerals potential of the Panoche Hills South WSA is described in a BLM internal report titled "Geology and Mineral Potential of the Panoche Hills, California" (L. Vredenberg, 1982). This data was used in the Affected Environment section of the Central California Study Areas Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) which is dated February 20, 1988.

The EIS states that there is potential for the occurrence of diatomite, gypsite, marl, phosphate and uranium. The EIS states that mineral development interest is low and that BLM records in July, 1986 indicated that there were no mining claims in the WSA. No material sale or permit sites were present.

The EIS states that there was one pre-FLPMA oil and gas lease covering 7,570 acres of the WSA. There was historic drilling exploration for oil and gas within three miles of the eastern WSA boundary. Two producing oil fields exist near the WSA, i.e., the Vallecitos field seven miles to the south and the Cheney Ranch field six miles to the east. A similar geologic setting was recognized along the eastern margin of the WSA. This geologic environment was recognized as a possible source for petroleum. The EIS stated that the WSA has low potential for oil and gas. Marl was known to have been excavated to the west and gypsite to the east of the WSA. Uranium is known to occur in diatomite outside the WSA, south of Panoche Creek. The EIS stated that similar occurrences of uranium may exist within the WSA, presumably based on similar geologic environment. The EIS stated that there was low potential for all these minerals.

2. Summary of significant new mineral resource data collected since the suitability recommendation, which should be considered in the final recommendation: Because this WSA was recommended nonsuitable by BLM in the EIS, no U.S. Geological Survey or U.S. Bureau of Mines mineral surveys were conducted for the Panoche Hills South WSA.

Based on new "confidential" information purchased from GeoMap Company in 1988 there has been a significant increase in the amount of data available to the BLM for this WSA. The new information is contained in a map titled "Structural Analysis of the San Joaquin Basin" (GeoMap, 1988 California Regional Base Map No. Cal-102 for the San Joaquin Basin).

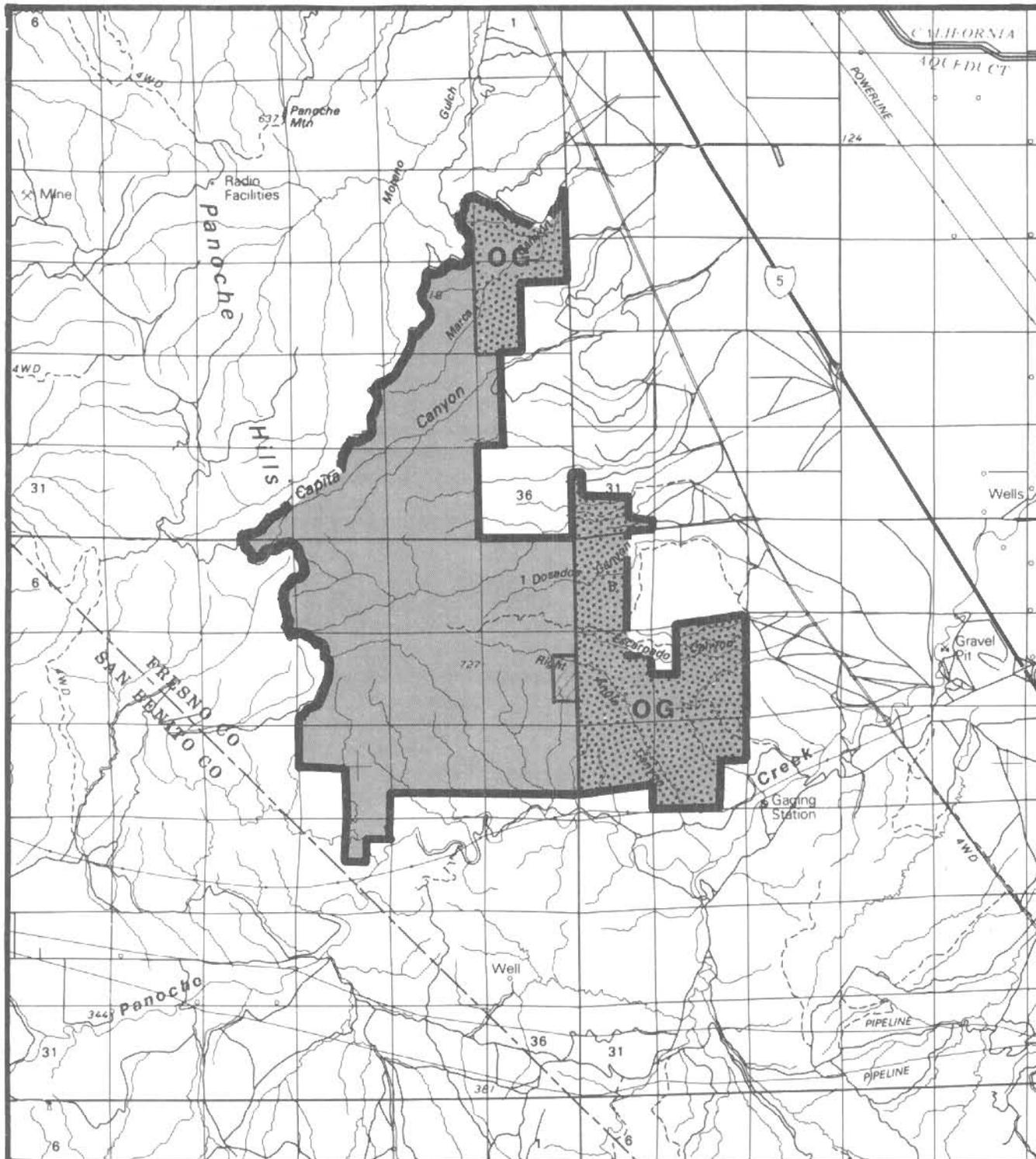
The data provided by this map, along with a more detailed investigation of both the surface and subsurface geologic data made by BLM geologist T. Moore in April, 1988, shows the existence of hydrocarbon deposits that have yet to be exploited.

Interest in mineral exploration is further indicated by BLM records dated March 25, 1988. There are no mining claims in the WSA. There is one 800 acre oil or gas lease in the southern part of the WSA.

Based upon the re-assessment of both new and existing data, a different mineral potential is assigned to portions of the Panoche Hills South WSA. There is moderate potential for hydrocarbon resources along the eastern margin of the WSA. All other mineral resources are still considered to be low as per the previous interpretations.

E. Impacts on Resources

The following table summarizes the effects on pertinent resources for all alternatives considered including designation or non-designation of the entire area as wilderness. (For a full explanation of this summary, refer to the Central California Study Areas - Wilderness Final Environmental Impact Statement.)

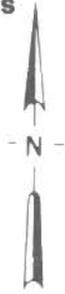


R 11 E | R 12 E

- NONE Recommended for Wilderness
- Recommended for Non Wilderness
- Land outside WSA Recommended for Wilderness
- Split Estate
- State
- Private

- Explanation**
- High Potential for the Occurrence of Energy and/or Non-energy Minerals
 - Moderate Potential for the Occurrence of Energy and/or Non-energy Minerals
 - M** Moderate Mineral Potential Location in a High Mineral Potential Area
 - H** High Mineral Potential Location in a Moderate Mineral Potential Area

Commodity Symbols
OG Oil & Gas



**Panoche Hills South
 Mineral Resource Potential**



**Map-2
 040-301B**

Table 4 - Comparative Summary of the Impacts by Alternative

ISSUE-RELATED RESOURCES	PROPOSED ACTION (NO-WILDERNESS/NO ACTION)	ALL-WILDERNESS ALTERNATIVE	PARTIAL-WILDERNESS ALTERNATIVE
Impact on Wilderness Values	There will be a minor, adverse impact on the area's wilderness values on 20 to 25 percent of the WSA as a result of the noise and surface disturbance associated with the projected 125 visitor-days of motorized vehicle use and exploration of the area's oil and gas resources.	There would be a minor, positive impact on the area's wilderness values as a result of closing the WSA to motorized recreation use and displacing the 75 visitor days estimated to occur annually along the 10 miles of jeep trails and prohibiting oil and gas exploration. Walk in access for hunting and other visitor use would continue from the edge of the WSA.	There would be a minor, adverse impact on the wilderness values on 15 to 20 percent of the nonsuitable portion of the WSA as a result of continued four-wheeled vehicle use and oil and gas exploration. The noise and surface disturbance associated with the exploration of the area's oil and gas resources would moderately impact these values, but will be short-term since production is not anticipated.
Impact on Paleontological Resources	The area's paleontological resources will be negligibly impacted as a result of continued four-wheeled vehicle use and oil and gas exploration and the special stipulations and conditions placed on surface disturbing activities within the Moreno Paleontological ACEC.	Wilderness designation would negligibly benefit the area's paleontological resources as a result of eliminating motorized vehicle use, oil and gas exploration and the surface disturbances associated with these activities.	Because of the special stipulations and conditions placed on surface disturbing activities in the Moreno ACEC, there would be only negligible adverse impacts on the paleontological resources in the nonsuitable portion of the WSA. Wilderness designation would negligibly benefit these resources in the suitable portion as a result of eliminating motorized vehicle use and oil and gas exploration.
Impact on Paleontological Investigation	There will be no impact on paleontological investigations	There would be a slight adverse impact on paleontological investigations as a result of the limitations placed on motorized vehicle access.	Paleontological investigations (including excavations) would be permitted in both the suitable and nonsuitable portions of the WSA. However, there would be a slight adverse impact on investigations in the suitable portion of the WSA due to the limitations placed on motorized vehicle access.

Table 4 - Comparative Summary of the Impacts by Alternative (cont.)

ISSUE-RELATED RESOURCES	PROPOSED ACTION (NO-WILDERNESS/NO ACTION)	ALL-WILDERNESS ALTERNATIVE	PARTIAL-WILDERNESS ALTERNATIVE
Impact on RARE Species	There will be a minor, adverse impact on the area's rare, threatened and endangered species as a result of the noise and surface disturbance associated with continued four-wheeled vehicle use and oil and gas exploration. Impacts on oil and gas exploration, however, will be short-term since production is not anticipated.	There would be a slight, positive impact on the area's rare, threatened and endangered species as a result of eliminating the noise and surface disturbance associated with motorized vehicle use and oil and gas exploration.	Impact for the rare, threatened, and endangered species in the nonsuitable portion of the WSA would be the same as those described under the Proposed Action. In the suitable portion of the WSA, the 30 visitor days of motorized vehicle use would be eliminated and oil and gas exploration would be prohibited, slightly benefitting the area's rare, threatened, and endangered plant and animal species.
Impact on Oil and Gas Exploration and Development	There will be no impact on oil and gas exploration. However, the potential for development is low.*	Oil and gas exploration and development would be foregone on the entire WSA.	There would be no impact on oil and gas exploration on the 5,067 acres not recommended suitable. However, oil and gas exploration would be foregone on the remaining 5,000 acres recommended suitable.

*Since this impact was identified in the Central California Study Areas EIS, it has been determined that the oil and gas potential is moderate in the eastern portion of the WSA.

F. Local Social and Economic Considerations

No local or economic considerations were identified in the Final EIS. Therefore, no further discussion of this topic will occur in this document.

G. Summary of WSA-Specific Public Comments

Several comments were received in the inventory phase dealing with mineral and wildlife values in the WSA and with the proximity of roads (including Interstate 5) as adverse influences outside the unit.

A public hearing was held in Fresno, California. During the public hearing and comment period, a total of 59 comments were received, both oral and written, related specifically to this unit. Nine comments supported the Bureau's no-wilderness alternative. Forty-seven comments supported the all-wilderness alternative. Three comments supported the partial-wilderness alternative.

The Resources Agency of California favored wilderness designation due to the protection it would give to endangered species and paleontological resources and due to non-representation of the California Steppe ecosystem in the National Wilderness Preservation System. The agency did not consider OHV trespass as a valid justification for recommending the area as nonsuitable for wilderness designation. No Federal, County, or Congressional comments specific to this WSA were received.