

## **SHELDON CONTIGUOUS WILDERNESS STUDY AREA**

### **1. THE STUDY AREA - 23,700 Acres**

The Sheldon Contiguous WSA (CA-020-1012) is located in Washoe County, Nevada in the northwest corner of the State. The WSA includes 23,700 acres of BLM lands and surrounds 608 acres of private lands (Table 1). The nearest towns and cities are Cedarville, California (40 miles southwest), Susanville, California (120 miles southwest) and Reno, Nevada (170 miles south). The WSA is bounded by the Oregon/Nevada line on the north, the Sheldon Refuge on the east and south and by Nevada Highway 34 and the Macy Flat Road on the west. The Refuge boundary is fenced. The stateline and the Macy Flat Road are infrequently maintained dirt roads. Highway 34 is a well maintained gravel road.

The WSA includes the eastern portion of Macy Flat, an intermittent lakebed, the upland benches to the east of the Flat and part of a series of low ridges on the north side of Yellow Peak. The topography and vegetation are typical of old Great Basin volcanic flows intermixed with intermittent lake basins. The dominant vegetation is sagebrush and scattered juniper trees. Elevations range from 5300 to 6600 feet.

The WSA was studied under Section 603 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) and was included in the Final Eagle Lake-Cedarville Wilderness Environmental Impact Statement completed in October 1987. The EIS amended the Cowhead/Massacre Management Framework Plan. There were four alternatives analyzed in the EIS; all wilderness, no wilderness, a partial wilderness where 748 acres would be designated as wilderness and 22,952 acres released for uses other than wilderness, (which is the recommendation of this report) and a second partial wilderness where 12,134 acres would be designated and 11,566 acres released for uses other than wilderness.

### **2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE - 748 acres recommended for wilderness 22,952 acres recommended for nonwilderness**

The recommendation for this WSA is to designate 748 acres as wilderness and release 22,952 acres for uses other than wilderness (Map 1). This recommendation is made only if the contiguous Charles Sheldon Antelope Refuge administratively endorsed WSA is also designated as wilderness. All wilderness is considered to be the environmentally preferable alternative as it would result in the least change from the natural environment over the long term. The partial wilderness alternative, the recommendation of this report, would be implemented in a manner which would utilize all practical means to avoid or minimize environmental impacts.

A small portion of the WSA was recommended for wilderness designation if the contiguous portion of the Sheldon WSA is also designated by Congress. The triangular piece is located in the southeast corner of the WSA separated from the rest of the BLM WSA by a continuous rim. Topographically the recommended wilderness fits well with the Sheldon proposed wilderness area.

The recommended wilderness does not on its own meet the minimum wilderness values described in the 1964 Wilderness Act. When combined with the Fish and Wildlife Service recommended wilderness, the unit contributes topographic continuity and a small area in a natural state with very limited opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation. There are no special features on the 748 acre recommended wilderness.

The recommended wilderness is manageable as wilderness due partially to the extreme ruggedness and steepness of the Rye Creek Rim. The steep and rough topography of the rim tends to screen any activities or visitors from activities in adjacent areas within the WSA. However, most of the wilderness characteristics would be lost if the adjacent Sheldon Refuge was not managed for wilderness values. Designation of this area would slightly increase the size of the Sheldon wilderness, assuming that Sheldon WSA was also designated. The increased size would slightly improve the ability of a wilderness visitor to find solitude and would allow for a small increase in opportunities for dispersed recreation.

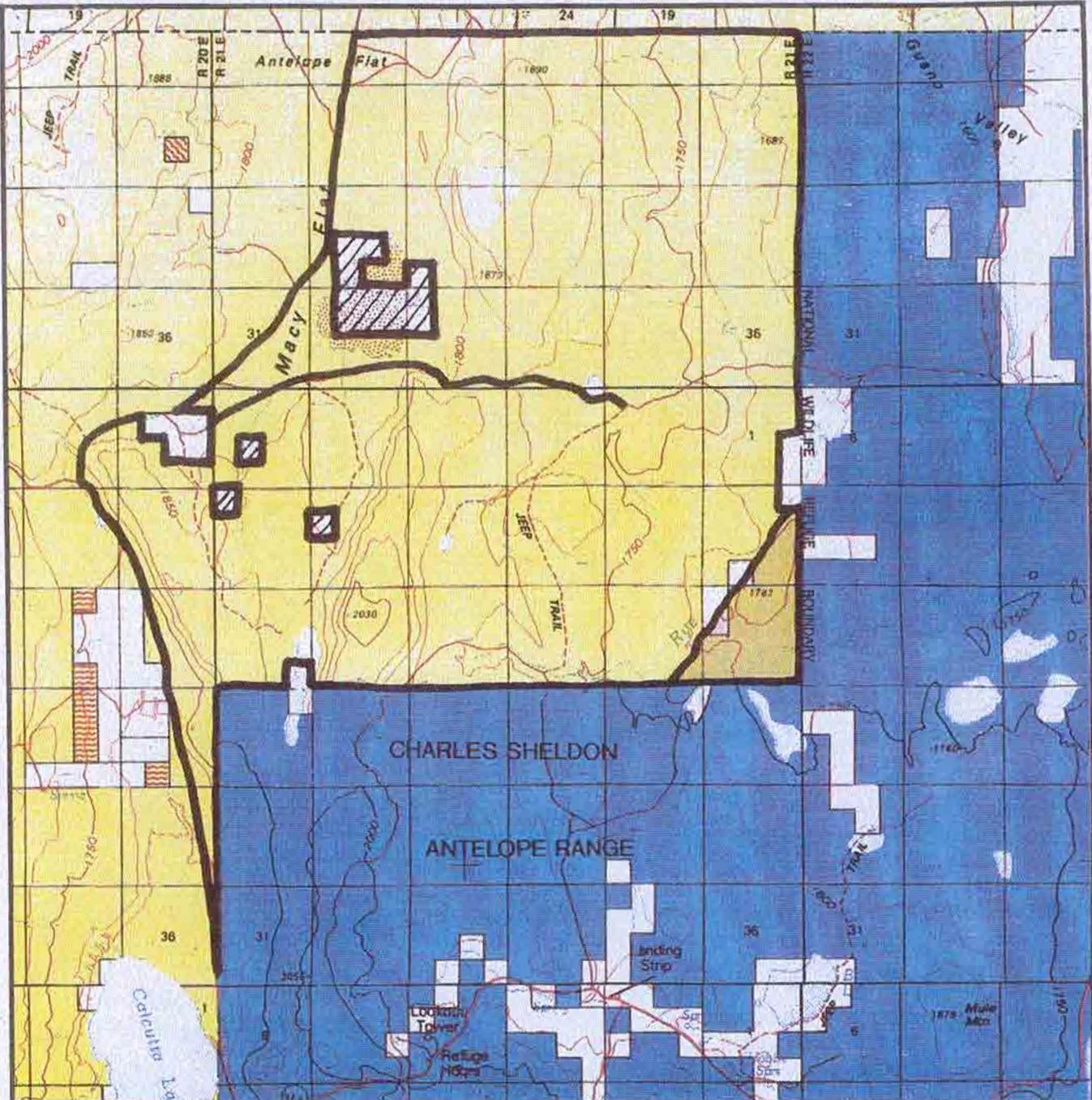
There are no conflicts with other resource uses in the recommended wilderness. Due to the topography, there is no livestock grazing and no known mineral potential or interest.

The 22,952 acres recommended for uses other than wilderness meet the minimum wilderness values described in the 1964 Wilderness Act and conflicts between wilderness and other resources are not significant. It was determined that the nonwilderness portion of the WSA did not contain any outstanding features that made it special or unique from the surrounding lands. Other nearby WSA's had outstanding or unique characteristics that made them better representatives for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. It was felt that given the lack of special features and the lack of quality wilderness values that releasing the nonwilderness portion of the WSA for uses other than wilderness is the most appropriate recommendation.

The character of the lands not recommended for wilderness is mostly natural. Small scale human intrusions are scattered rather evenly across the western portion of the WSA. These include livestock management improvements and vehicle ways. These intrusions would be regularly maintained in support of grazing management.

The conflicts between wilderness qualities and other resource uses on the area not recommended for wilderness are relatively small. The major uses of the WSA are by cattle during the summer and wildlife year round. Due to regionally high interest in deer hunting adjacent to the refuge, the western portion of the WSA does receive moderate motorized recreational use by hunters for a month in the fall. There are no topographical or vegetative barriers to cross country vehicular travel and during peak hunting use periods such travel commonly occurs.

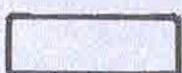
In summary, the nonwilderness portion of the WSA differs little from much of the surrounding country other than its lack of roads. Its wilderness values are not exceptional but common to the region. Other nearby WSA's were judged to have higher wilderness values that would make them better representatives to be added to the National Wilderness Preservation System.



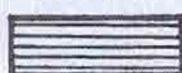
RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS -



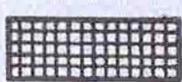
SPLIT ESTATE - NONE



RECOMMENDED FOR NONWILDERNESS -



STATE - NONE



LAND OUTSIDE WSA RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS - NONE



PRIVATE -



MILES

Table 1  
Land Status and Acreage Summary of the Study Area

<u>Within Wilderness Study Area</u>	
BLM & FWS (surface and subsurface)	23,700
Split Estate (BLM surface only)	0
Inholdings (state, private)	<u>608</u>
Total	24,308
 <u>Within the Recommended Wilderness Boundary</u>	
BLM (within WSA)	748
BLM (outside WSA)	0
Split Estate (within WSA)	0
Split Estate (outside WSA)	<u>0</u>
Total BLM Land Recommended for Wilderness	748
 Inholdings (State, private)	 0
 <u>Within the Area Not Recommended for Wilderness</u>	
BLM & FWS	22,952
Split Estate	<u>0</u>
Total BLM Land Not Recommended for Wilderness	22,952
 Inholdings (State, private)	 608

### **3. CRITERIA CONSIDERED IN DEVELOPING THE WILDERNESS RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **Wilderness Characteristics**

**A. Naturalness:** The Sheldon Contiguous WSA is predominately natural with limited human imprint. The WSA consist of open tablelands and rounded buttes sloping down from the north side of Yellow Peak on the Sheldon Refuge. The tables and buttes are relatively small in size and are broken by narrow, low rimrocks and scattered pockets of dark green western juniper. The predominant vegetation is low sagebrush growing less than two feet tall on shallow, rocky soils. Several of the tables contain shallow, seasonal lakebeds with sparse grass stands. Antelope commonly use the tables and lakebeds in the spring and early summer before the vegetation dries out. Mule deer can occasionally be observed along the rims, particularly near the refuge boundary.

In the WSA the imprint of man's work is related to facilities to support livestock grazing and access roads and ways for construction and maintenance of the facilities as well as for hunting.

The facilities to support livestock grazing include small stock ponds, one 60 acre herbicide treatment area and six short pieces of fencing totaling approximately 2.5 miles. All of these projects, with the possible exception of the treated field, were judged to be of very low profile and hence of low impact to naturalness.

The access ways total approximately 23 miles in length. Most of the ways within the WSA receive use only by light vehicles during hunting season and thus are two wheel tracks through the sagebrush. This makes the ways of relatively low impact on the naturalness. However, the ways are being maintained in their present condition and are not reverting back to a natural state. There is one "cherrystem road" which penetrates the WSA from the western boundary two-thirds of the width of the Unit and continues as a way

to the eastern boundary. The road is of generally low overall impact to naturalness.

The human related imprints are not evenly distributed within the WSA. The eastern portion of the WSA has almost no man related intrusions, while the remainder of the WSA contains all the facilities discussed and an estimated 90% of the access ways. Thus within the WSA, the eastern portion is substantially more natural than the western portion. The recommended wilderness has no unnatural features.

**B. Solitude:** The Sheldon Contiguous WSA has outstanding opportunities for solitude. At low levels of use, visitors would be able to find solitude. The gentle terrain, generally low vegetation, scattered juniper stands and excellent visibility all combine to limit the outstanding opportunities for solitude.

**C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation:** The Sheldon Contiguous WSA does not have outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation. This is due to the lack of resources normally used by dispersed recreation users. The WSA has no distinctive topography or vegetational features. The WSA has no dependable water, which is important to recreational users and results in relatively low densities and diversity of wildlife. While outstanding opportunities do not exist, the WSA does contain some opportunities for dispersed recreation for hikers and horseback riders for sightseeing and hunting.

**D. Special Features:** The WSA is contiguous to one Unit of Administratively endorsed Sheldon Refuge Wilderness Study Area (F&WS, 26,000 acres) along the southern boundary and the southern quarter of the eastern boundary. The combination of the two WSA's would be a 50,300 acre unit which would result in increased opportunities for solitude and wilderness type recreation.

**Diversity in the Natural Wilderness Preservation System**

**A. Assessing the diversity of natural systems and features as represented by ecosystems:** Wilderness designation of the Sheldon Contiguous WSA would not add a new ecosystem to the National Preservation System or to Nevada. This WSA is in the sagebrush-steppe desert ecosystem. At the present time, there are four existing wilderness areas; Jarbidge and Santa Rosa in Nevada, South Warner in California and Craters of the Moon in Idaho, within this ecotype. This information is summarized in Table 2.

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>			
Intermountain Sagebrush Province				
Sagebrush Steppe	4	131,199	138	4,356,340
	<u>NEVADA</u>			
Sagebrush Steppe	2	86,907	34	1,252,442

**B. 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 three major population centers. Table 3 summarizes the number and acreage of designated areas and other BLM study areas within a five hour drive of the population centers.

Table 3  
Wilderness Opportunities for Residents of Major Population Centers

Population Centers	NWPS Areas		Other BLM Studies	
	Areas	Acres	Areas	Acres
<u>Nevada</u>				
Reno	45	4,967,230	175	6,945,487
<u>California</u>				
Redding	14	1,236,503	11	344,633
<u>Idaho</u>				
Boise	22	937,766	172	5,127,039

**C. Balancing the geographic distribution of wilderness areas:** The Sheldon Contiguous WSA would contribute to balancing the geographic distribution of areas within the National Wilderness Preservation System in Nevada. Designation of the WSA and contiguous FWS area would provide the public a wilderness opportunity in northwestern Nevada. The South Warner Wilderness, administered by the Modoc National Forest is the only designated wilderness area within 50 miles of the WSA.

**Manageability** (the area must be capable of being effectively managed to preserve its wilderness character).

The entire WSA could be managed as wilderness. The portion of the WSA recommended for wilderness designation can be managed as wilderness. The area contains no private inholdings, "cherrystem" roads or valid rights which would impair manageability. Additionally, the boundaries use topographic features which would preclude problems with intentional or unintentional vehicle use.

The portion of the WSA not recommended for wilderness designation could also be managed as wilderness. However, several factors would make management of the area difficult. Most of this portion is open, rolling terrain dominated by sparse stands of low growing sagebrush. It is common practice for hunters to travel cross country in vehicles to avoid long walks. Additionally, the penetration of the non-suitable portion by two "cherrystem" roads would allow vehicles good access to the interior of the area increasing the probability of cross country travel. The nature of the non-wilderness portion of the WSA is such that erection of barriers would not be effective as vehicles could easily drive around the barriers.

**Energy and Mineral Resource Values**

The BLM minerals investigations, which included consultations with industry, did not identify a significant potential for mineral development, including oil and gas. There are no existing mineral rights and no mining claims are known to exist.

An analysis of the mineral resource potential and geothermal potential of the adjacent Charles Sheldon Antelope Refuge Wilderness Study Areas was conducted by the U.S. Geological Survey and U.S. Bureau of Mines. Evaluation is based on the interpretation of analysis of rock and stream sediment samples, analyses of spring water samples, geologic mapping and geophysical surveys. Results indicate the area has low potential for the discovery of exposed mineral deposits; however, the results suggest that the area may contain concealed deposits. Surface data suggests the area has a low potential for geothermal resources. There are no sand and gravel use sites within the WSA. The WSA is considered to have only very low potential for oil and gas.

The joint U.S. Bureau of Mines-U.S. Geological Survey report for the 748 acres recommended for wilderness designation indicated no mineral potential.

**Impacts on Resources**

The following comparative impact table summarizes the effects on pertinent resources for all the alternatives considered including designation or non-designation of the entire area as wilderness.

**Table 4  
Comparative Summary of the Impacts by Alternative**

<u>Issue Topics</u>	<u>Proposed Action (Partial Wilderness)</u>	<u>All Wilderness Alternative</u>	<u>Partial Wilderness Alternative</u>	<u>No Wilderness Alternative</u>
Wilderness Values	Wilderness values on 748 acres would remain unchanged. The 26,600 acre Sheldon Refuge Wilderness would be slightly larger. On the non-wilderness portion of the WSA, naturalness and opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation would be slightly reduced.	All wilderness values would be protected and slightly enhanced over existing levels. Illegal ORV use would slightly reduce solitude on the western portion of the WSA. The combined BLM/FWS wilderness would be over 50,000 acres.	On the 12,134 acres of wilderness, naturalness would be slightly reduced by project development. Opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation would be slightly improved. The opportunity for creation of a BLM/FWS wilderness area would be slightly enhanced. On the nonwilderness portion, naturalness and opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation would be slightly reduced.	Opportunities for solitude and naturalness would slightly decline over the long term with project development and ORV use. Any BLM/FWS wilderness opportunities would be foregone.
Recreational ORV Use	There would be no significant impacts on recreational ORV use. The designated portion has no vehicle access and receives little if any use.	Recreational ORV use would be eliminated with 400 visitor days foregone annually.	Current ORV use as well as a projected increase of 100 visitor use days would occur on the 11,566 acre non-wilderness portion of the WSA. There would be only negligible impacts.	Orv use would slowly increase by 100 visitor use days to a total of 500 visitor days annually. There would be no impacts on recreational ORV use.

**Local Social and Economic Considerations**

Social and economic factors were not an issue for the Sheldon Contiguous WSA study.

### Summary of WSA-Specific Public Comments/Involvement

During the inventory phase 18 comments were received that dealt with the WSA. Seventeen comments supported wilderness designation and one comment opposed designation due to private inholdings.

The Susanville District Advisory Council (DAC) after reviewing the BLM Wilderness Study/EIS Process, recommended to the District Manager and California State Director that the Technical Review Team Process be used to assist the BLM in preparing the Draft Wilderness EIS. The Technical Review Team (TRT) process was developed by the Modoc/Washoe Experimental Stewardship Committee. It was used as a tool to lessen the chances of polarization of interest groups and provide the Bureau with better quality public input for decision making purposes through a consensus recommendation. The Council selected eight member teams, representing the following resources and interests:

- Livestock-Adjacent Landowners
- Wildlife-Agencies-Sportsmen
- Wilderness-Environmental-Dispersed Recreation
- Minerals-Energy-Utilities
- Wild Horses
- Motorized Recreation
- Cultural-Historical-Archaeological
- Bureau of Land Management

The representatives were very knowledgeable and highly respected members of their interest groups. The TRT reviewed the WSA in the field and solicited public input before meeting several times to work out a recommendation on the WSA. Consensus was required before a recommendation was forwarded to the District Advisory Council (DAC). The DAC then accepted the recommendation and forwarded it to the District Manager. The District Manager reviewed the TRT's recommendation and it became the BLM's recommended action for this WSA.

The key issues raised through public involvement and analyzed by the Technical Review Team and the EIS were: the quality of the wilderness resource and how much was appropriate to be preserved as wilderness and concern that wilderness designation would eliminate existing motorized recreational access associated with hunting.

During the formal public review of the draft EIS, a total of 336 comments specifically addressing the WSA were received. Written comments consisted of 324 letters while 12 oral comments were received at three public hearings. Two hundred ninety comments supported the Bureau's recommendation, 41 comments supported more wilderness than the Bureau's recommendation and five comments supported nonwilderness.

Those favoring the Bureau's recommendation mentioned the consensus reached by the TRT group and reiterated the wilderness values of the WSA.

Both those who commented in favor of no wilderness and more wilderness than the Bureau's recommendation, mentioned nonspecific concerns about wilderness values or potential resource conflicts.

The State of Nevada, through the Nevada Clearinghouse, the Nevada Division of State Parks and the Nevada Department of Minerals all supported the BLM's recommendation, the DEIS. The Nevada Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the Bureau of Reclamation and the Environmental Protection Agency all commented on aspects of the EIS but did not take a position on wilderness designation.