

# **Symmec Creek**

*CA-010-064*

SYMMES CREEK WILDERNESS STUDY AREA (WSA)

(CA-010-064)

1. THE STUDY AREA — 8,717 acres

The Symmes Creek WSA is located in the northern half of Inyo County, approximately two miles south of Independence, California. The WSA includes 7,694 acres of BLM lands, 383 acres of Inyo National Forest lands (USFS), 640 acres of private inholdings, and no State land (see Map 1 and Table 1).

The northern boundary of the WSA follows a graded dirt road to the east, then heads south along an irregular boundary of private land. The WSA boundary turns west along Shepherd Creek and proceeds one and one-quarter miles where it jogs south until it meets a maintained dirt road south of Shepherd Creek. The boundary continues west along this road until it intersects Foothill Road. The boundary proceeds north along Foothill Road until it intersects the graded dirt road which serves as the WSA's northern boundary.

The WSA lies in the transition zone of the Basin and Range and the Sierra Nevada geomorphic provinces. Composed of sedimentary outwash from the Sierra Nevada mountain range, the WSA consists of a broad, rocky alluvial apron at the eastern base of the Sierra. The WSA gently slopes downward to the east. Elevation ranges from 4,000 feet to 5,600 feet. Topographical relief is generally uniform, providing little variation in the landscape. Shallow dry washes are scattered throughout the unit. The northern and southern portions of the unit are traversed by two perennial creeks — Symmes Creek and Shepherd Creek. The unit is uniformly composed of mixed desert shrubs. In 1985, a wildfire burned most of the vegetation in almost one-half of the WSA. For a few years, vegetation had not reestablished in the WSA. However, vegetation slowly has reestablished in areas burned by the wildfire.

The WSA was studied under Section 603 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA). Various suitability recommendations were analyzed in the Draft and Final Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) for the Benton-Owens Valley/Bodie-Coleville Wilderness Study Areas. A summary of the area's wilderness values was included in the Final EIS. Two different suitability recommendations were analyzed in the EISs: all wilderness and no wilderness.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE — 0 acres recommended for wilderness  
8,077 BLM & USFS acres recommended for nonwilderness

No wilderness is the recommendation for this WSA. The entire acreage in this 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.

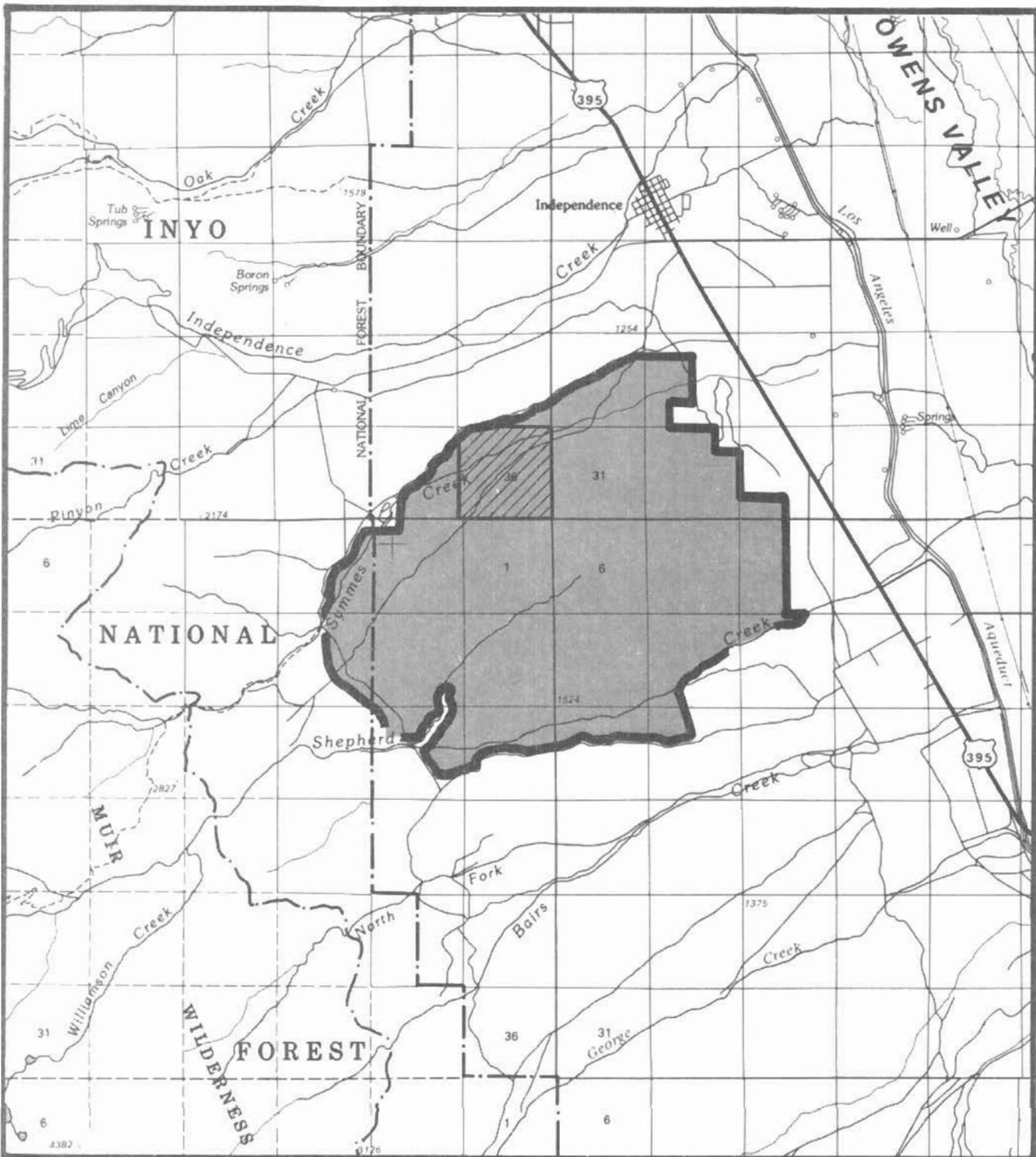
The WSA is recommended non-suitable because it contains marginal wilderness values that lack significant or unique special features. As a result, the WSA is considered to possess a low overall wilderness quality. The need for apiary site operations also outweigh the area's low wilderness values. Finally, manageability was a tertiary consideration in the non-suitable recommendation.

Solitude is limited along the eastern boundary which is approximately one-half mile from U.S. Highway 395. The highway is a main transportation link between Los Angeles and other points north. The WSA reflects an environment that has little topographic relief and as a result is visually bland. It portrays a landform and vegetation that is generally displayed along the eastern base of the Sierra Nevada. The WSA's vegetative patterns, forms and textures blend together into a monotonous landform cover. The ribbon-like creeks provide the major visual contrast in the unit. Although the unit contains the prerequisite wilderness values to qualify as a WSA, it lacks the significant and unique values to enhance or diversify the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). This overall wilderness quality was a primary consideration in the nonsuitable recommendation.

Three apiary sites are located in the southern portion of the WSA. Each site occupies approximately one-quarter acre. Due to spatial requirements which maintain bee colony stability, few opportunities are available to relocate these sites elsewhere.

The WSA's relatively flat topography makes the unit somewhat difficult to manage as wilderness. The outside sights and sounds of U.S. Highway 395 are apparent from the eastern edge of the unit and the irregular eastern boundary feature also limits manageability.

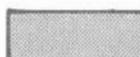
There are approximately ten miles of primitive ways which will remain available for vehicular use.

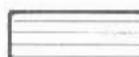


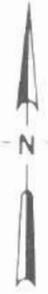
T 13 S  
T 14 S

T 14 S  
T 15 S

R 34 E | R 35 E

-  NONE
-  RECOMMENDED FOR NONWILDERNESS
-  LAND OUTSIDE WSA RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS

-  SPLIT ESTATE
-  STATE
-  PRIVATE



**Symmes Creek  
Proposal  
MAP-1**



010-064  
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)	7,694
Split Estate	(BLM surface only)	0
USFS	(surface and subsurface)	383
Inholdings		
State		0
Private		640
Total		<u>8,717</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)	7,694
Split Estate	(BLM surface only)	0
USFS	(USFS surface and subsurface) <sup>1</sup>	383
Total BLM Land Not Recommended for Wilderness		<u>7,694</u>
Total USFS Land Not Recommended for Wilderness		383

<sup>1</sup>The USFS has agreed to allow these lands, located in the Inyo National Forest, to be reported as part of the BLM WSR. When Congress acts, the lands will be managed in accordance with the current approved management plan.

3. CRITERIA CONSIDERED IN DEVELOPING THE WILDERNESS RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Wilderness Characteristics

1. Naturalness: The WSA slopes gently eastward from the base of the Eastern Sierra and consists of a broad alluvial fan. The western half of the WSA is typically dominated by blackbrush, a vegetative climax community.

Bitterbrush and sagebrush integrate at the upper elevations of the WSA. The eastern half of the WSA is a mixed desert shrub community dominated by goldenbush and saltbush. Symmes and Shepherd Creeks contain succulent riparian zones of willows and water birch.

The Symmes Creek WSA contains some evidence of man's works. These man-made impacts are substantially unnoticeable in the WSA as a whole. However, the biggest alteration to naturalness since the designation of the WSA in 1979 was the intense wildfire that burned 3,520 acres of the WSA, primarily in the western half. The fire was caused by a lightning strike which was fanned by extremely high and erratic winds. This resulted in total destruction of all plants in the fire's path. In addition, five miles of fire breaks were constructed to keep the raging fire from spreading to adjacent private land and nearby residences. Rehabilitation was not conducted due to low probability of success.

By 1988 vegetation was reestablished throughout the burn area. Bitterbrush has resprouted while new shrubs and perennial grasses have moved into the area. The shallow washes show evidence of wind and water erosion. Willows and water birch have resprouted along Symmes and Shepherd Creeks.

Man-made imprints that existed at the time of the intensive wilderness inventory and prior to the fire include five to six miles of primitive vehicle routes. After the inventory, three beehive sites and some water-spreading and diversion facilities along the eastern portion of the WSA were discovered. Overall, these features are unnoticeable in the WSA as a whole, except on a localized basis.

2. Solitude: The area provides outstanding opportunities for solitude due to the unit's size. Although the burning of all vegetation in the western half of the WSA has limited these opportunities, this charred and barren landscape imparts an eerie feeling of desolation to area visitors. As natural rehabilitation continues, the landscape will return to a natural appearance and reduce this heightened sense of solitude. The influences of U.S. Highway 395, located one-half mile east of the WSA, and a cherrystem intrusion in the southwest corner of the WSA somewhat degrade opportunities for solitude.

This WSA is overflowed by military aircraft as part of the national defense mission during approved military operations. The visual intrusions and associated noise create temporary effects on solitude which are deemed acceptable and necessary as a part of the defense preparedness of the nation.

3. Primitive and unconfined recreation: The WSA provides opportunities for primitive and unconfined types of recreation. These opportunities include trout fishing in Symmes and Shepherd Creeks, hunting, camping, and other activities. Visual amenities are low due to uniformity of landform character within the WSA.
4. Special features: The unit contains several features of noteworthy significance. It contains Symmes and Shepherd Creeks and associated riparian habitats which are a necessary micro-environment for local flora and fauna who rely on this water source to survive the harsh desert environment of Owens Valley. These two creeks contain brown and rainbow trout, and provide riparian habitat. In addition, the western one-half of the WSA is crucial winter habitat for mule deer that rely on this habitat for forage requirements during the harsh Sierra high-country winters.

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 8,077 acres of the Intermountain Sagebrush/Great Basin Sagebrush ecosystem. The Symmes Creek WSA would not increase the diversity of the types of ecosystems 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>				
Intermountain Sagebrush/ Great Basin Sagebrush	1	32,407	55	1,196,941
<u>CALIFORNIA</u>				
Intermountain Sagebrush/ Great Basin Sagebrush	0	0	19	212,475

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 seven 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>California</u>				
Anaheim-Santa Ana	25	2,823,534	153	5,703,515
Bakersfield	32	4,071,358	128	3,998,548
Los Angeles-Long Beach	27	2,876,234	135	4,958,751
Oxnard-Ventura	23	2,195,198	85	2,703,260
Riverside-San Bernardino	22	2,031,054	205	7,658,649
<u>Nevada</u>				
Las Vegas	46	3,507,293	311	11,186,463
Reno	39	4,647,230	175	6,904,809

3. Balancing the geographic distribution of wilderness areas: The WSA is within 50 air miles of eight BLM WSAs recommended for wilderness designation. Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Park and the John Muir Wilderness, three and six miles to the west, respectively, are the nearest designated wilderness areas. These wilderness areas are administered by the National Park Service and the Inyo National Forest, respectively. Other nearby designated wilderness areas include the Golden Trout Wilderness and the Ansel Adams Wilderness which are managed by the Inyo National Forest.

#### C. Manageability

The Symmes Creek WSA is manageable as wilderness, but only with some difficulty. The unit's gently sloping landscape and its sparse vegetation make the WSA very susceptible to indiscriminate off-road vehicle use. Most of the WSA is vulnerable to vehicle encroachment. Additionally, the outside sights and sounds of U.S. Highway 395, located one-half mile east of the WSA, detracts from solitude along the eastern boundary. Finally, the irregular eastern boundary feature makes on-the-ground identification of the unit boundary difficult.

Frequent signing, fencing of most of the border, intensive patrolling and providing detailed maps would be required to insure the integrity of the unit.

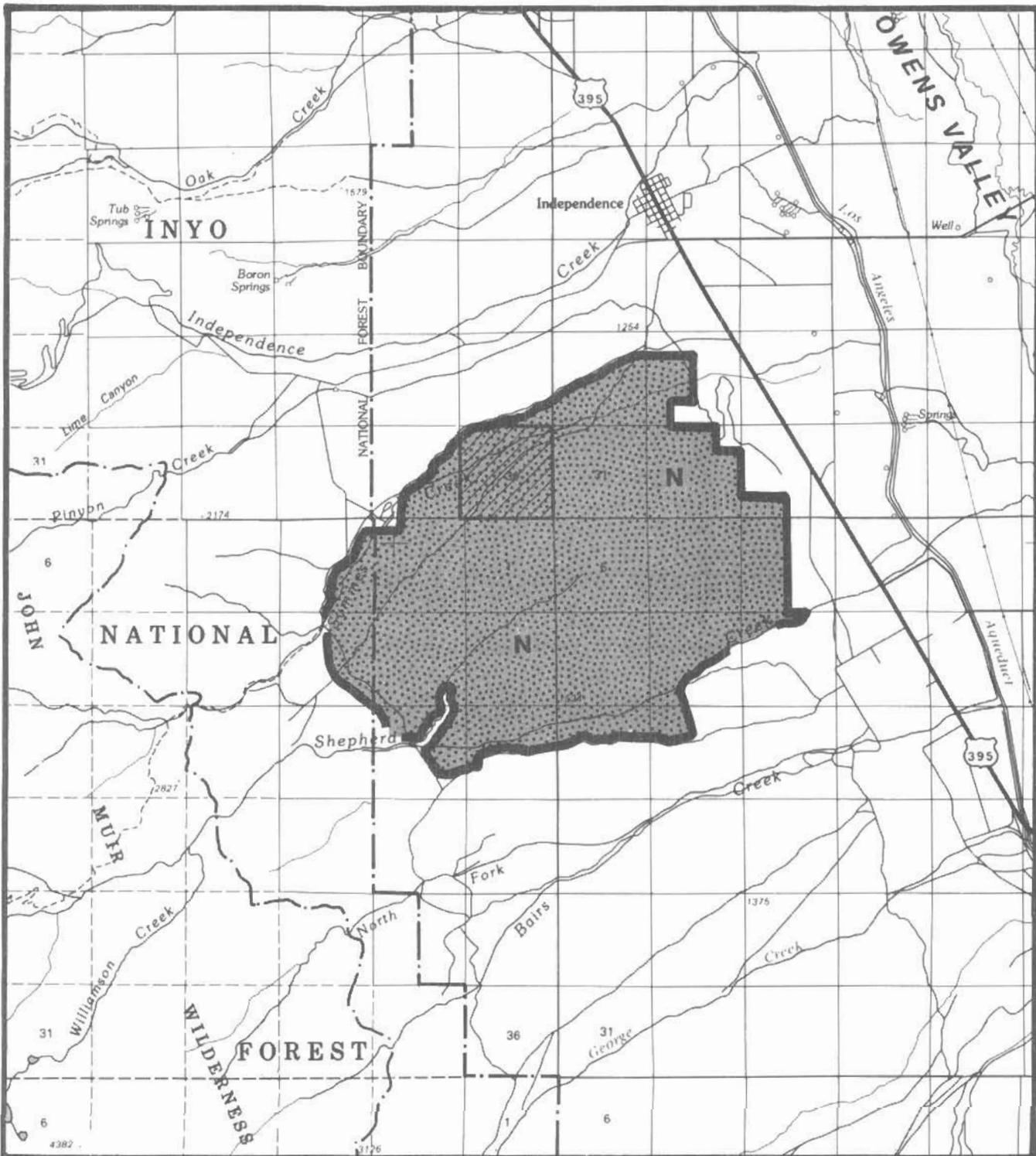
Military overflights in this WSA must be considered to maintain the integrity of the existing and future national defense mission as well as the wilderness resource.

D. Energy and Mineral Resource Values

1. Summary of information known at the time of the preliminary suitability recommendation: The Symmes Creek Wilderness Study Area (WSA) is in the BLM Alabama Geology - Energy - Minerals (GEM) Resource Area (GRA). BLM GEM data in the Affected Environment section of the Benton-Owens Valley Bodie-Coleville Study Areas EIS (1987), indicated that the Symmes Creek WSA had low potential for metallic minerals, uranium, thorium, and geothermal. There is moderate potential for nonmetallic minerals. Although rated as having moderate potential, non-metallics such as sand and gravel are considered to have low development potential due to the unknown quality of this material and its ample availability outside the WSA. There is no potential for oil and gas in the WSA. There are no known unpatented mining claims in the WSA. There are no mineral leases in the WSA.
2. Summary of significant new mineral data collected since the suitability recommendation which should be considered in the final decision: No new data has been generated since the EIS of 1987.

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 Benton-Owens Valley/Bodie-Coleville Wilderness - Final Environmental Impact Statement.)



R34E | R35E

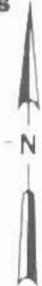
- NONE Recommended for Wilderness
- Recommended for Non Wilderness
- Land outside WSA Recommended for Wilderness
- Split Estate
- State
- Private

**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**

**N** Non-metallic



**Symmes Creek  
Mineral Resource Potential**



**Map-2  
010-064**

Table 4 - Comparative Summary of the Impacts by Alternative

ISSUE-RELATED RESOURCES	PROPOSED ACTION (NO-WILDERNESS/NO ACTION)	ALL-WILDERNESS ALTERNATIVE
Wilderness Values	Overall, impacts to wilderness values, primarily naturalness and solitude, would be negligible and for the most part, short-term. Construction and maintenance of three proposed livestock facilities as well as the repair or removal of fish structures would insignificantly add to the existing low levels of impact from motorized recreation use and vehicle use for livestock operations and maintenance of water-spreading and diversion channels. The continued existence of apiary sites, existing water-spreading and diversion channels, and proposed water developments would only result in less than 170 acres of impairment of the perception of naturalness.	There would be a slight positive benefit to wilderness values particularly naturalness and solitude as a result of eliminating 500 visitor days of motorized recreation use. Locally, wilderness values would be negligibly improved as a result of the removal of three apiary sites and a reduction in vehicle use associated with existing livestock operations and maintenance of facilities. Construction and maintenance of proposed water developments for livestock and the continued maintenance of water-spreading and diversion channels would locally have a minor impact on naturalness and solitude on less than 110 acres.
Motorized Recreation Use	The entire WSA would remain open to motorized recreation use on existing routes and trails. There would be no impacts on motorized recreation use.	Motorized recreation use totaling 500 visitor-days would be foregone. This would result in only a minor impact as opportunities for motorized recreation use are available on other public lands outside the WSA, and the boundary roads would provide access to users that wish to continue using the area without vehicles.
Apiary Sites	There would be no impacts on apiary sites within the WSA. Beekeeping operations would be permitted at three existing apiary sites.	Wilderness designation would eliminate three apiary sites from the WSA. There would be an adverse impact on beekeeping operations due to the lack of suitable relocation sites.

F. Local Social and Economic Considerations

No local social 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

During the inventory phase, a comment was received which addressed the WSA's potential mineral values and the influence of outside sights and sounds on the WSA's wilderness values. Another comment indicated the area's potential for ground water recharge facilities.

After the inventory, comments were received during the wilderness study process. Several comments noted that the adjacent USFS RARE II lands add to the WSA's wilderness values. One comment noted that the existing water-spreading and flood channels require maintenance of related roads and trails. One comment noted the scenic values of the WSA while one comment stated that the WSA did not meet wilderness standards.

During the study phase, a public meeting and public hearing were held in association with the draft EIS. The public meeting was held in Markleeville, California, and the public hearing in Bishop, California. Comments were received both orally through the hearing, and in writing during the 90-day public review period. A total of 83 written and oral comments were received. Forty-one comments supported the Bureau's no-wilderness recommendation. Forty-two comments supported the all-wilderness alternative.

No Federal agency comments were received specific for this WSA.

The California Department of Fish and Game recommended that vehicle use in the study area be confined to existing roads and trails.

The Inyo County Board of Supervisors has passed a resolution opposing any additional wilderness areas in Inyo County.