

# National Grasslands Plan Revision

February 2008



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## Kiowa, Rita Blanca, Black Kettle and McClellan Creek National Grasslands

### Plan Revision

continues on these four areas which are under the management of the Cibola National Forest and Grasslands, based in Albuquerque, New Mexico. This plan revision newsletter will serve to update you on where we are in the process and invite you to upcoming meetings to help us revise the Management Plan.

## Planning Rule History and Status

On March 30, 2007 the US District Court for the Northern District of California issued an injunction that ordered the Forest Service to discontinue use of the 2005 planning rule. In August 2007, the Forest Service released a Draft Environmental Impact Statement for a new Planning Rule and accepted comments through October.



The Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for the 2008 Planning Rule was released on February 7, 2008. The FEIS identifies the Forest Service's preferred alternative and is a procedural move towards the implementation of a new planning rule. A decision on the final rule has not been made—that decision will be made by the Department of Agriculture after the FEIS has been available for 30 days.

## Plan Revision Progress

For the last several months, the plan revision team for the Kiowa, Rita Blanca, Black Kettle and McClellan Creek National Grasslands has moved forward with drafting documents under the National Forest Management Act. The Socio-Economic, and Ecological Sustainability Reports and the Integrated Need for Change Reports have been





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## Plan Revision Progress Continued

worked on and reviewed by the Regional Office for science consistency. We have also released a draft of the Potential Wilderness Area Evaluation for the portion of the Canadian River known as Mills Canyon and have had several opportunities for the public to comment on the report.

Our next step in the plan revision process will be to develop a set of "Desired Condition" descriptions for the Grassland resources. These Desired Condition statements will describe the ecological, social, and economic attributes that characterize the desired outcome of land management. The Grassland's Desired Conditions will be the focus of the land management plan and will serve as a guide for the development of actions or activities that are designed to achieve these conditions over time.

Even though the plan revision process has been moving more slowly than we anticipated, it is an important step in addressing future management of these resources. We are looking forward to re-engaging fully with the public on a broad range of planning topics in the near future including the development of the set of Desired Conditions.

## Draft Canadian River Potential Wilderness Area Evaluation Report

### Introduction

On October 24, 2007, the Forest Service released a draft of the Canadian River Potential Wilderness Evaluation Report, which examined if Mills Canyon near Roy, NM would fit the criteria for inclusion on the National Wilderness Preservation System. Since then we have received 43 written comments. Overall, comments have stressed that Mills Canyon is a valuable asset to all New Mexicans and an important part of the local heritage of Harding and Mora Counties. The majority of comments wanted to allow more people to enjoy and use the canyon while balancing the need to take care of its natural and historic resources. As we continue with the plan revision process, the Forest Services' interdisciplinary team will review all of the comments received and update the report.

The following is a summary of the type of comments received to date.





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## Draft Canadian River Potential Wilderness Area Evaluation Report continued

### Recreation opportunities

Many comments recognized the importance of Mills Canyon for providing primitive and unconfined recreation. Hiking, picnicking, family gatherings, hunting, fishing, scenery and nature-watching were all mentioned as popular and valuable activities that the canyon is used for. For this reason many comments recognized the importance of keeping the road on the west side of the river to the cottonwood gallery, which is a popular location for many of these activities.

Though outside sights and sounds were mentioned in the report, some letters pointed out that these uses are not often noticeable in the canyon and that it should not be a major consideration in evaluating the capability of the canyon as wilderness.

### Tourism/Economic Development

There were divergent opinions on how a wilderness designation might effect the tourism potential and economic development of the canyon. Some prefer that the canyon's opportunities be maintained "as it is," for fear that restrictions would hurt the local tourism economy and present hardships for local residents. Others believed that a new wilderness area would fit well with Harding County's economic development planning as a marketable asset. A few commenters were concerned that a wilderness designation would attract more people, and that, without adequate management, would cause more impacts.

### Off-road vehicle use

Almost all comments recognized the need to control off-road vehicle use to protect the natural and scenic resources of the canyon, regardless of the commenter's opinion on wilderness designation. Comments recommended that the Forest Service close "unneeded roads and step up enforcement." There were many who recommended that a Forest Service presence and possibly a permanent employee be part of this strategy. Many pointed out that the creation of new trails by off-road vehicles should be stopped, in particular to protect vegetation, wildlife, water, and the ecosystem as a whole.



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## Draft Canadian River Potential Wilderness Area Evaluation Report continued

A few comments were more cautious stating that they did not like new restrictions on motorized vehicle use and that motorized vehicles were important to ensure that the canyon was available to all users.

One commenter pointed out that regardless of whether or not the canyon was recommended for wilderness, off-road vehicle access is an issue that must be addressed.

### Invasive Plant Treatments

Several people commented on the importance of treating salt cedar and other invasive plants to maintain the health of the Canadian River watershed. Some agreed with the report that this would be difficult to manage under a wilderness designation because it would require the use of machinery and mechanized equipment. Others felt that salt cedar treatments should not preclude wilderness designation because the majority of the invasive can be removed before designation. In addition, small scale removal (hand treatments) could be carried out after designation.

### Resource Protection

Several people commented that protection of Mill's Canyon's outstanding natural and historic features should be a priority for any planning effort there. Soil, vegetation, and scenery were all mentioned as assets that wilderness would protect. A few people were concerned that wilderness designation would make maintaining the historic structures within the canyon more difficult.

### Grazing

Grazing is an allowable use in wilderness areas. Some people expressed the concern that wilderness designation would make maintaining cattle operations and facilities in the canyon more difficult because of the restricted use of motorized vehicles and mechanized equipment.

### Boundary changes

Three specific boundary changes were proposed by commenters: to exclude the road



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## Draft Canadian River Potential Wilderness Area Evaluation Report continued

on the west side of the river up to the cottonwood gallery that is a commonly used picnic area, to exclude the section of State Trust land on the east side of the canyon, and to include areas of shortgrass prairie and pinon-juniper woodland above the rim of the canyon.

### Need Assessment

There were several critiques of the need evaluation. Some commenters pointed out that the wilderness areas that were compared to Mills Canyon for landform and vegetation features were not similar in size, ecoregion or geology. These commenters did not feel that the evaluation adequately considered the features that make Mills Canyon unique and different from existing wilderness areas. For instance, the other wilderness areas in NE New Mexico are only open to skiing and snowshoeing in the winter while they believe Mills Canyon has the potential to be open to other wilderness uses year round.

In particular, some commenters thought that the Bandelier Wilderness and the Sabinoso Wilderness Study Area were not comparable to Mills Canyon because Bandelier has different geology, and Sabinoso does not provide access to the Canadian River. On the other hand, others commented that Sabinoso is similar to Mills Canyon.

Other comments stated that there is already enough wilderness in New Mexico and that we should not "lock it [Mills Canyon] away for nature's sake." Others stated that Mills Canyon is already a difficult area to manage and that wilderness designation would add more complications. Another commenter thought that there was not enough public demand to constitute a need for additional wilderness and that there were already enough restrictions on the use of the canyon.

### Other comments

Other comments received included:

- the need to maintain access for the elderly and handicapped in the canyon;
  - the importance of maintaining woodcutting opportunities in the area;
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## Draft Canadian River Potential Wilderness Area Evaluation Report continued

- the possibility that designation would adversely affect downstream landowners;
- the difficulty of conducting search and rescue and fire management activities in the canyon, if the area were recommended for wilderness;
- and the concern of future introduction of endangered species if the area were made a wilderness.

These comments, along with those received at public meetings, are currently being analyzed by the interdisciplinary team for the Canadian River Potential Wilderness Area and will be used to revise the draft report.

## Disclaimer

Please be aware that all comments received, unless requested otherwise, will be considered part of the public record and will be available for public inspection.

## Contact Us!

Please feel free to contact us with questions or suggestions regarding plan revision or to be added or removed from our mailing list. Please also let us know if we should update or correct your mailing information. Here is how we can be reached:

**Website:** [http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/cibola/plan-revision/national\\_grasslands/index.shtml](http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/cibola/plan-revision/national_grasslands/index.shtml)

**Comment form:** [http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/cibola/plan-revision/national\\_grasslands/contactus.shtml](http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/cibola/plan-revision/national_grasslands/contactus.shtml)

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