

## VII. IDENTIFICATION OF THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE SELECTED ALTERNATIVE

The RARE II decisionmaking process has systematically led to development of a selected alternative. Rationale involved in reaching the decision includes seven decision criteria identified earlier in this statement, a series of "compelling reasons" for allocating roadless areas, and the Department of Agriculture's desire to provide a well rounded, diversified Wilderness System. Use of decision criteria in developing a proposed course of action has been described both in Section IV and VI. It will not be reiterated here. It is important to elaborate further on compelling reasons for allocation of roadless areas and highlight the Department's desire to provide quality additions to the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Throughout the decisionmaking process, a primary goal has been to achieve a high quality system with minimum impact on commodity outputs. Uniqueness of a roadless area, superlative wilderness qualities, or containment of highly unusual features have been compelling reasons for recommending an area as wilderness. Special consideration was also given to those areas felt to be necessary to facilitate management of an existing wilderness or provide for its expansion. It is also desirable to add roadless areas to the System that will improve total distribution of wilderness throughout the country. This factor was a compelling reason for proposing wilderness for roadless areas in some eastern and midwestern states. The Department believes it important to add roadless areas to the System that provide for a diversity of ecosystems, wilderness associated wildlife, and landform types. The support of elected officials, such as Congressmen, Governors, or others, for wilderness or nonwilderness designation is also a reason for that recommendation.

Resource tradeoffs were compelling reasons for allocating a roadless area to either the wilderness or nonwilderness category. Areas with high oil and gas potential were normally not allocated to wilderness so options for realizing this resource potential could be maintained. But, if an area was small enough to permit slant drilling outside the boundary, it could be allocated to wilderness. High timber values have been used as reasons to allocate an area to nonwilderness. It is recognized that these and similar values may occupy only a small portion of the roadless area and may be realistically excised with boundary adjustments. This practice has been applied in many cases to retain high quality wilderness potential of an area and still realize commodity benefits available within it. Allocations have also been made throughout this process to resolve long-standing controversies and react to stated public opinion. Roadless areas, in most cases, have been allocated to nonwilderness or further planning when mineral and energy potential is high. In areas with proven or producing resources, the area was usually allocated to nonwilderness.

Other compelling reasons for allocating a roadless area to nonwilderness include existence of wildlife habitat improvement projects developed in cooperation with state game departments or if the area must remain as nonwilderness for full implementation of a recovery plan for threatened or endangered wildlife species.

In other instances, areas have been allocated to nonwilderness to permit essential, heavy impact resource activities such as extensive fuel break construction in southern California. Finally, roadless areas were allocated to nonwilderness when the cumulative effect of resource loss would cause significant dislocation of or complete loss of a segment of a localized economic base. An example is the loss of significant numbers of livestock industry jobs within a segment of a county, as might occur in some parts of western Colorado and North Dakota.

A primary compelling reason for allocating an area to further planning was the need for gathering of additional data on which to base a decision. This allocation has been utilized throughout the process for this and other reasons but it has always been the Department's goal to minimize the acreage in this category. There are instances, particularly where some involve the Bureau of Land Management, that roadless areas were allocated to further planning to permit joint planning of National Forest and contiguous lands of another agency. Finally, the need for an in-depth study to determine boundary adjustments beyond the capability of RARE II has been a compelling reason for allocating areas to further planning.

It is recognized there are numerous situations involved with the process of allocating roadless areas that can and must be resolved within the political arena. Final boundaries, magnitude of resource values foregone, and the question of whether an area should be classified wilderness following the Administration's recommendation will only be resolved in Congress. Input from over 359,000 individuals, stated positions of elected officials, and the Administration's desire to provide a stable flow of material from National Forests and Grasslands and an enduring wilderness resource for future generations have helped to shape this proposed action. There are tradeoffs involved in proposing these decisions and resolution of tradeoff conflict can only become a reality at the political level. This proposed action, developed through the numerous steps identified in this document, is designed to fill the needs of wilderness and nonwilderness use on the National Forest System throughout the United States.

The proposed action recommends addition of 15,088,838 acres to the National Wilderness Preservation System. It will permit development of the 36,151,558 acres allocated to nonwilderness use and will hold 10,796,508 acres in further planning pending completion of land management plans. The proposed action, in recommending additions to the NWPS has selected high quality areas that will increase diversity in and distribution of the System. Many areas Congressionally mandated for wilderness study are recommended for wilderness RARE II, eliminating need for further study. This action was proposed for those areas where public support, resource tradeoffs, and other decisionmaking factors suggest the area should be resolved now. Through the allocation of roadless areas to nonwilderness use and the potential remaining in those allocated to further planning, the National Forest System commitment for resource and commodity outputs will be met. The proposed action represents the combination of roadless area allocations that will best provide for both wilderness and nonwilderness needs of the Nation.

The task remaining is to implement the course of action proposed in this final environmental statement. Areas recommended for wilderness will be presented to Congress as legislative proposals. This package will, along with currently endorsed areas and

potential allocations from the further planning category represent the National Forest System share of the National Wilderness Preservation System. Action on the proposal will be recommended to the 96th Congress. Minor adjustments of roadless area boundaries to improve management, for instance to provide recognizable boundaries or permit trailhead facilities, will be made before Congressional hearings on the areas are conducted.

Areas allocated to nonwilderness will be available for nonwilderness use when the decision presented in this statement is implemented. Entry into these areas and utilization of resources will be regulated by current laws, regulations, and within constraints of existing management plans. As current plans are updated in accordance with Section 6 of the National Forest Management Act, RARE II inventoried roadless areas allocated to nonwilderness need not be considered further for wilderness.

Roadless areas allocated to further planning will be considered for all uses, including wilderness, during the land and resource management planning or specific project planning process conducted at the local forest level. This category also includes some areas Congress designated for study that will be decided by other than the land management planning process. In so far as possible, wilderness quality will be retained in the roadless areas allocated to further planning and certain incompatible management activities such as timber harvest and associated road construction will be prohibited.

Unless there is additional exploration for oil and gas resources permitted in many areas allocated to further planning, subsequent wilderness - nonwilderness decisions will have to rely on data not much better than currently exists. Knowledge about the oil and gas potential varies considerably between roadless areas but, at best, is fragmentary and far from conclusive. In most areas, virtually no exploration for oil and gas has occurred. In others, geophysical surveys and a few widely spaced, unproductive wells have been drilled.

Exploration by drilling to determine oil and gas potential is essential in reaching conclusions in land management or project plans that allocate roadless areas. Such exploration would provide the only rational basis for a determination on whether national interest requires production of oil and gas or whether the area should be included in the Wilderness System. If exploration establishes absence of significant quantities of these minerals, the planning process can be completed without further delay. Significant oil and gas resources could be unknowingly included in statutory wildernesses at a time when production of oil and gas would be highly beneficial from a national energy standpoint. Because the issuance of mineral leases in established wildernesses is presently authorized but highly controversial, it is important that conflicts between oil and gas and wilderness resources be resolved prior to the completion of land management planning.

For the above reasons, oil and gas exploration (including drilling where adequate exploration requires it) will be considered an integral part of the further planning process. Oil industry exploration proposals will be examined on a case-by-case, site-specific basis in full compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act. This means before on-the-ground activities are permitted, environmental assessment reports will be made. Where proposed activities, individually or cumulatively, would have major effects on quality of the human environment, environmental impact statements will be prepared with full public involvement. Where environmental impacts are judged unacceptable, the proposed activities will be disapproved.

Exploration drilling involves drill site construction and usually requires the construction and use of access ways. If these facilities are constructed with short-term use and prompt reclamation in mind and are located so as to avoid areas having extremely high environmental sensitivity, impacts on wilderness values should be minimal in all but a few cases. Full reclamation can usually mitigate impacts to such a degree that wilderness designation will remain a viable option.

Approval of exploration proposals will be contingent upon concurrence of lessees/operators and the Secretary of the Interior that new leases and operating plans under existing leases contain, as appropriate, stipulations providing that:

- Seismic prospecting must precede drilling, unless Geological Survey certifies that drilling is the next logical step in the process of determining whether an area contains oil or gas in commercial quantities.

- No surface occupancy will be permitted for construction of access ways and drill sites in areas of extremely high environmental sensitivity.

- Access way construction will be permitted only where other methods of access are clearly impractical. Access ways will be built to a standard no higher than required to move the drilling rig in and out. Surface resources will be protected during the period that the access ways are in use.

- If a well capable of production is not discovered, the access way and drill site will be reclaimed to a standard that encourages prompt return of disturbed areas to the prior roadless condition.

- Commercial production of oil and gas and development drilling will not be approved until allocation decisions have been made through the land management planning process.

The last stipulation is necessary to preserve a wilderness option. Since the Secretary of the Interior has authority (43 CFR 3103.3-8), in the interest of conservation, to suspend payment of lease rentals and minimum royalties and to extend the term of a lease, lessee/operator rights are protected during the period the land allocation decision is being made.

This then is how the selected alternative was developed by the Department of Agriculture for allocation of RARE II inventoried roadless areas. It is believed to be the best possible solution to meet the many diverse needs of the public that utilize and enjoy the multiple use benefits of the National Forests and National Grasslands.