

Wilderness, Sportsmen Values, and Tonto National Forest Land Management Planning

March 3, 2017

Purpose:

The purpose of this paper is to guide input by the Arizona sportsmen's community on the Wilderness Area review that will be conducted by the US Forest Service (USFS) as part of the Tonto National Forest Land Management Plan Revision. As required by law, the USFS will be making recommendations for new Wilderness Areas through the Tonto National Forest plan revision. This paper is being provided to ensure that those recommendations are consistent with sportsmen values and priorities.

Wilderness Act Requirements and Tonto National Forest Land Management Planning Process.

The USFS's 2012 Planning Rule states that in developing a proposed new land management plan or proposed plan revision, **the USFS must complete the following process for identifying, evaluating, and recommending lands that may be suitable for Wilderness designation.** (36 CFR 219.7 (c)(2)(v)):

1. **Inventory (sec. 71):** The USFS shall identify and create an inventory of all lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the NWPS. The inventory must be broad and inclusive and be based on a set of inventory criteria. Inclusion in the inventory is not a designation that conveys or requires a particular kind of management. Lands included in the inventory must be documented and identified on a map. This map will be available for public review during the plan revision or development process.
2. **Evaluation (sec. 72):** The USFS shall evaluate and document the wilderness characteristics of each area in the inventory using a set of criteria based on the Wilderness Act of 1964. This documentation will be available for public review during the plan revision or development process.
3. **Analysis (sec. 73):** The USFS shall consider the areas evaluated and determine, based upon the evaluations and input from the public, which specific areas to carry forward in the applicable National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) document for further analysis and public review. These

areas must be identified within the applicable NEPA document as part of one or more alternatives. Not all lands included in the inventory and subsequent evaluations are required to be carried forward for further analysis.

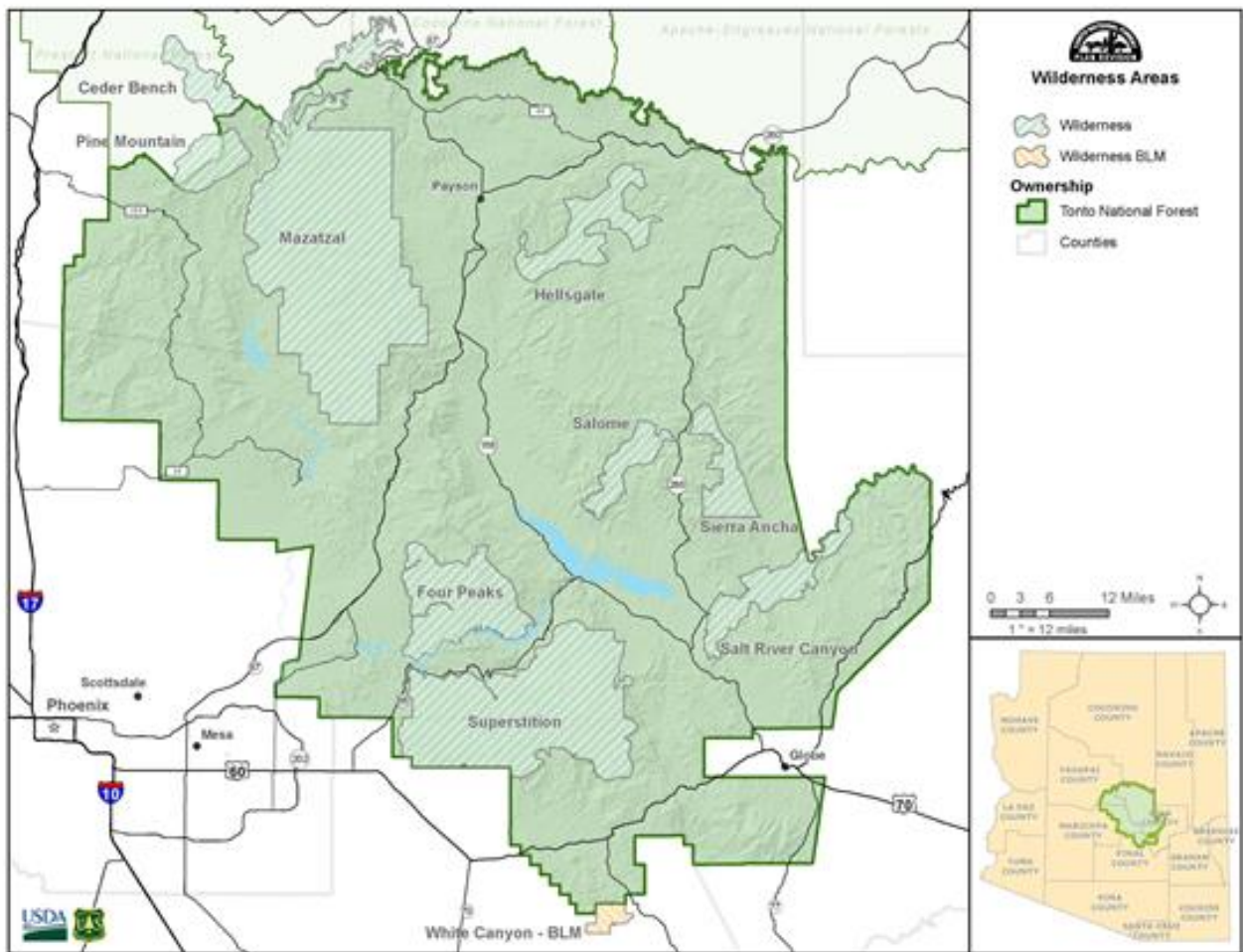
4. **Decision (sec. 74):** The USFS shall decide, based upon the analysis disclosed in the applicable NEPA document and input from the public, which areas, if any, to recommend for inclusion in the NWPS, and shall identify any such lands in the final decision document for the plan.

The USFS will use the public participation opportunities provided as part of the broader forest planning process (FSH 1909.12, ch. 40) to engage the public and other governments to provide feedback and input throughout the wilderness review process. Additional opportunities for public participation will be provided if necessary. Appendix A provides a brief overview of the provisions of the Wilderness Act.

Tonto National Forest Wilderness Areas.

The Tonto National Forest (TNF) currently includes eight Wilderness Areas, encompassing more than 589,300 acres, or 20 percent of the TNF (Figure 1). Appendix B provides a brief description of the designated Wilderness Areas in the TNF.

Figure 1. Designated Wilderness Areas in the Tonto National Forest

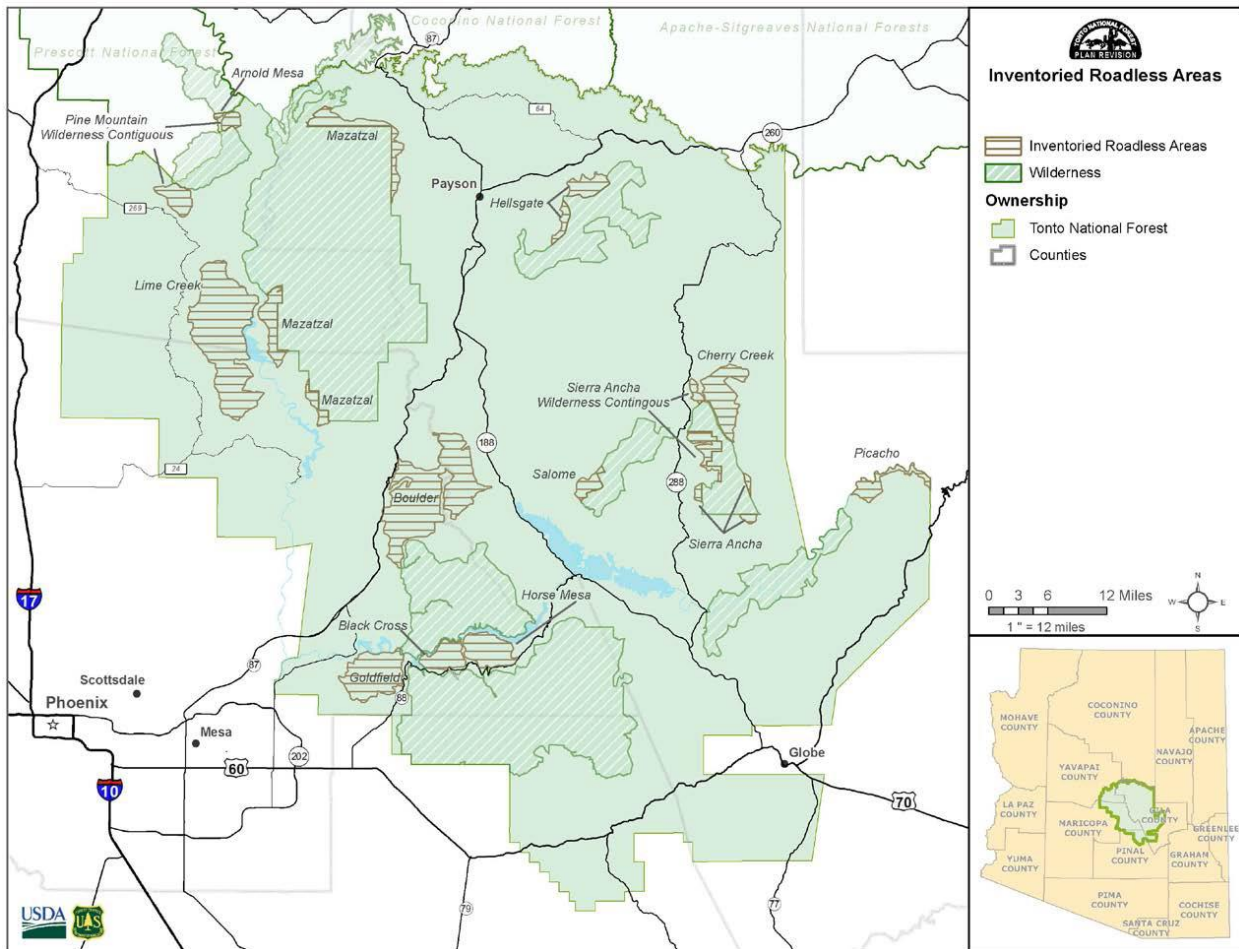


Inventoried Roadless Areas

Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRAs) were identified by the Forest Service during an inventory process that was completed in 1979, and these lands in Arizona are managed under the direction of the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Final Rule, (36 CFR Part 294).

The TNF includes 13 IRAs (Figure 2) encompassing 264,876 acres (9% of the TNF). IRAs are lands that are most likely to be considered for a new or expanded wilderness designation. Collectively, designated Wilderness Areas and IRAs currently account for 30% of the TNF.

Figure 2. Inventoried Roadless Areas in the Tonto National Forest



Proposed new Wilderness Areas.

Public input on new or expanded Wilderness Areas will be considered by the USFS in the TNF planning process. The TNF Assessment Report (volume 2, page 330) includes an Ash Creek Wilderness proposal from the Sierra Club that includes the 4,969-acre Picacho Inventoried Roadless Area and an additional 10,969 acres - totaling 15,938 acres. The proposed additions include the upper part of the Ash Creek drainage, plus a larger “set back” area from the Salt River. The complete area is bounded on the east by San Carlos tribal lands, and on the north and west by the Salt River. The southern boundary roughly follows the Ash Creek/Salt River rims on TNF lands. The proposal cites resource values such as

recreation, wildlife, cultural and archeological values, and watershed that are important within the proposed area. According the USFS, the Ash Creek Proposed Wilderness Area will be included in the wilderness inventory that will be conducted as part of the forest plan revision. Additional wilderness proposals may come forward during the USFS Wilderness review process

How Wilderness Designations Affect Sportsmen and Wildlife.

Recreational uses permitted in a Wilderness Area include hunting, fishing, hiking, horseback riding, backpacking, and camping. The Wilderness Act also helps protect important wildlife habitats from energy development, logging, road-building, and vehicle use. Some sportsmen prefer to hunt or fish in Wilderness because they enjoy the solitude and primitive experiences available there, and Wilderness Areas have been shown to provide greater opportunities to harvest mature age class fish and game than in most hunting units in more developed areas.

One of the defining features of Wilderness Areas is the absence of roads and prohibitions on vehicular travel. A number of reports and scientific studies have evaluated the benefits of roadless and Wilderness Areas on wildlife, habitat and hunting. For example, a report published by the New Mexico Game and Fish Department (2006) concluded that Wilderness and roadless areas provide high quality, hunting and fishing opportunities because they are relatively undisturbed/remote and serve as core habitat area for game animals and cold water fish species. Studies by Wisdom and others (2005) concluded that off-road recreational activities have a substantial effect on elk behavior and movement. Leptich and Zager (1991) reported that in highly roaded areas in Montana, only 5% of elk live to maturity. Road closures extend the number of mature bulls to 16% and extend their longevity to 7.5 years.

However, there are longstanding concerns in the Arizona sportsmen community over the establishment of additional Wilderness Areas in the TNF. Major concerns include:

- Currently, 21% of the TNF is designated as Wilderness. An Additional 9% of the TNF are roadless areas. Yet, of the approximately 4.8 million visitors to the TNF, approximately 150,000 (3%) utilized Wilderness Areas (USFS 2016). Many sportsmen believe that existing Wilderness Areas already provide ample opportunity for primitive forms of recreation including hunting and fishing.
- Wilderness Areas limit public access to foot travel and horseback. These restrictions practically exclude or limit use by many seniors or disabled individuals in favor of the young and fit. Some preferred uses of public lands are excluded in Wilderness Areas such as all-terrain vehicle use and mountain biking. Many big game hunters avoid hunting in Wilderness Areas due to the difficulties associated with access and packing big game out of very remote areas.
- Many parts of the TNF are in need of active restoration. Because of access limitations, Wilderness imposes restrictions on activities such as forest thinning, controlled burns, and stream restoration.
- A Wilderness designation imposes restrictions and practical limitations on active wildlife management including but not limited to development or maintenance of water catchments for wildlife, habitat improvements, vegetation management, and stream improvements.
- Wilderness limits multiple uses of the TNF which are important to local and regional economies. According to the Arizona Game and Fish Commission (2016), while federal lands make up 42 percent of Arizona, more than 43 percent of those lands have special land use designations (Wilderness, national monuments/parks, wildlife refuges, areas of critical environmental

concern, etc.) that significantly restrict recreation and wildlife management. This includes 4.5 million acres of designated Wilderness, the third highest total in the United States.

- Wilderness rules and regulations greatly increase the amount of red tape and time needed to implement active forest and wildlife management activities. In addition, such activities proposed in Wilderness Areas are often litigated by wilderness/environmental advocates who view any intrusion or active management in a Wilderness Area as a violation of the Wilderness Act.

Sportsmen's Criteria for New or Expanded Wilderness Areas

Because the USFS will be making recommendations for new Wilderness Areas through the TNF plan revision, sportsmen need to be constructively engaged to ensure that those recommendations are something that the sporting community can live with and support. Paramount in achieving this outcome is that sportsmen demand and participate in a Wilderness review process that is locally driven, transparent, incorporates the science-based management and conservation of important fish and wildlife habitat, and upholds continued opportunities for management activities that maintain or restore fish and wildlife populations and their habitats.

The following sportsmen's criteria should be used in considering new areas for TNF wilderness recommendation:

1. Wilderness should only be established or expanded in areas where the management and access needs are consistent with the requirements and intent of the Wilderness Act i.e., Wilderness should only be designated in areas (a) that are resilient and need little active restoration or management, or (b) there is little opportunity for active management over the long-term (e.g., because the area is too rugged or remote), or (c) there are few wildlife values present.
2. Impacts to existing sportsmen's access should be minimal.
3. Wilderness must be designated in a way that maintains important sportsmen's access and specifically allows for management activities that maintain or restore fish and wildlife populations and their habitats, including the installation of guzzlers to provide water and the use of helicopters to collar wildlife. When Wilderness is actually designated, these uses should be specifically allowed through the legislation (see the Nevada Pine Forest Wilderness Bill language in Appendix C).
4. Wilderness designation must also recognize and provide for compatible traditional uses of the land, and provide for the continued state management of wildlife.

References cited

Arizona Game and Fish Commission. 2016. A resolution of the Arizona Game and Fish Commission concerning the loss of multiple use of public lands due to special land use designations. January 15, 2016. Arizona Game and Fish Department, Phoenix AZ

Leptich, D.J., and P. Zager. 1991. Road access management effects on elk mortality and population dynamics. *In* Proceedings of a symposium on elk vulnerability, pp. 126-130. New Mexico Game and Fish Department. 2006. Wildlife, Habitat and Hunting: New Mexico's Roadless Areas, Santa Fe NM.

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Wisdom, M. J., A. A. Ager, H. K. Preisler, N. J. Cimon, and B. K. Johnson. 2005. Effects of Off-Road Recreation on Mule Deer and Elk. Pages 67-80 in Wisdom, M. J., technical editor, The Starkey Project: a synthesis of long-term studies of elk and mule deer. Reprinted from the 2004 Transactions of the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference, Alliance Communications Group, Lawrence, Kansas, USA.

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Appendix A. Additional background on the Wilderness Act and designated Wilderness

The Wilderness Act of 1964, created the National Wilderness Preservation System and recognized wilderness as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” The Act further defined wilderness as “an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions” (For the complete definition of wilderness, see Section 2(c) of the [Wilderness Act](#).)

Congress has designated more than 106 million acres of federal public lands as Wilderness. Additional public land areas that have been designated as Wilderness Study Areas are managed as wilderness until Congress acts on their status. Only Congress may designate Wilderness or change the status of Wilderness Areas. Congress has directed four federal land management agencies—U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service—to manage Wilderness Areas so as to preserve and, where possible, to restore their wilderness character.

The Wilderness Act prohibits permanent roads and commercial enterprises, except commercial services that may provide for recreational or other purposes of the Wilderness Act. Wilderness Areas generally do not allow motorized equipment, motor vehicles, mechanical transport, temporary roads, permanent structures or installations (with exceptions in Alaska), although some recently enacted Wilderness legislations have allowed for wildlife water development structures (e.g., guzzlers) to be constructed and/or maintained. Wilderness Areas are to be primarily affected by the forces of nature, though the Wilderness Act does acknowledge the need to provide for human health and safety, protect private property, control insect infestations, and fight fires within Wilderness Areas.

Appendix B. Designated Wilderness Areas in the Tonto National Forest

1. The **Four Peaks Wilderness Area** was established in 1984, and contains approximately 60,740 acres. Elevations range from 1,900 feet near Apache Lake to 7,600 feet on Brown's Peak. A large part of this wilderness was burned by a human-caused fire in 1996. It will take decades for the pine-covered mountains to recover.
2. The **Hellsgates Wilderness Area** was established in 1984, and contains approximately 37,440 acres with a major canyon and perennial stream extending its entire length. Deep pools of water may be separated by impassable falls. Elevations range from 3,000 feet along the lower end of Tonto Creek to 6,400 feet on Horse Mountain.
3. The **Mazatzal Wilderness Area** contains over 252,500 acres of the Tonto and Coconino national forests. Established as a Primitive Area in 1938-1940 and expanded to its present size and designated a Wilderness Area in 1984, its name is from an old Indian culture in Mexico meaning "land of the deer." The eastern side of this wilderness predominantly consists of brush or pine-covered mountains, sometimes broken by narrow, vertical-walled canyons. On its west side below the steep brush-covered foothills, the Verde River flows through the Sonoran Desert. Elevations range from 2,060 feet along the Verde River to 7,903 feet on Mazatzal Peak.
4. The **Salome Wilderness Area** was established in 1984 and contains approximately 18,530 acres, with a major canyon running practically its entire length. The upper reaches of Salome Creek and Workman Creek are small perennial streams snaking their way through the bottom of this scenic canyon. Pools of water can be found nearly all year. Cross-country travel is very difficult. Elevations range from 2,600 feet at the lower end of Salome Creek to 6,500 feet on Hopkins Mountain.
5. The **Salt River Canyon Wilderness Area** contains approximately 32,100 very rugged acres and was established in 1984. The Salt River and its spectacular canyon bisect the wilderness for its entire length. Elevations range from 2,200 feet at the canyon's lower end to 4,200 feet on White Ledge Mountain. There are no maintained trails within the entire wilderness. Travel is basically done by raft or kayak during a short and dangerous river-running season.
6. The **Sierra Ancha Wilderness Area** contains approximately 20,850 acres. It was established in 1933 as a "Primitive Area" and designated as a Wilderness Area in 1964. The extremely rough topography limits cross-country travel; however, there is an extensive system of trails. Sierra Ancha consists of precipitous box canyons, towering vertical cliffs, and pine-covered mesas. Elevations range from 4,000 feet near Cherry Creek to more than 7,400 feet on several high peaks, with the highest point on Aztec Peak at 7,733 feet.
7. The **Superstition Wilderness Area** was designated as a Primitive Area in 1939, expanded to its present size, and designated as a Wilderness Area in 1984. It contains approximately 160,200 acres. There is a well-developed trail system, and the western end of the wilderness receives heavy use during the cooler times of the year.
8. The **Pine Mountain Wilderness Area** was designated in 1972 and contains 20,053 acres. Pine Mountain Wilderness straddles the boundary between Prescott and Tonto National Forests and overlooks the Verde River valley from the 6,814 foot Pine Mountain.

Appendix C. Nevada Pine Forest Active Wilderness Management Provisions. These provisions should be included in and Wilderness legislation enacted by Congress.

(b) MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

.—In furtherance of the purposes and principles of the Wilderness Act (16 U.S.C. 1131 et seq.), management activities to maintain or restore fish and wildlife populations and the habitats to support the populations may be carried out within the Wilderness area designated by this Act, if the activities are (1) carried out consistent with relevant wilderness management plans; and (2) in accordance with

(A) the Wilderness Act (16 U.S.C. 1131 et seq.); and (B) appropriate policies, such as those set forth in Appendix B of House Report 101–405, including the occasional and temporary use of motorized vehicles if the use, as determined by the Secretary, would promote healthy, viable, and more naturally distributed wildlife populations that would enhance wilderness values with the minimal impact necessary to reasonably accomplish those tasks.

(c) EXISTING ACTIVITIES

.—Consistent with section 4(d)(1) of the Wilderness Act (16 U.S.C. 1133(d)(1)) and in accordance with appropriate policies such as those set forth in Appendix B of House Report 101–405, the State may continue to use aircraft, including helicopters, to survey, capture, transplant, monitor, and provide water for wildlife populations.

(d) WILDLIFE WATER DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

Subject to subsection (f), the Secretary shall authorize structures and facilities, including existing structures and facilities, for wildlife water development projects, including guzzlers, in the wilderness areas designated by section 4(a) if (1) the structures and facilities will, as determined by the Secretary, enhance wilderness values by promoting healthy, viable, and more naturally distributed wildlife populations; and (2) the visual impacts of the structures and facilities on the wilderness areas can reasonably be minimized.