

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

OF THE PROPOSED OURAY TO CISCO HIGHWAY SURVEY

THROUGH THE WINTER RIDGE AND FLUME CANYON

WILDERNESS STUDY AREAS



Winter Ridge WSA

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF INTERIOR

SEPTEMBER 1991





United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
Vernal District Office
170 South 500 East
Vernal, Utah 84078



REPLY REFER TO:

1790
UT080

SEP 24 1991

Dear Public Land User:

This final Environmental Assessment (EA) of the Proposed Ouray to Cisco Highway Survey Through the Winter Ridge and Flume Canyon Wilderness Study Areas is provided for your information and use. The original EA was published in July, 1991 and was made available for public review and comment. This final EA contains the corrections to the initial document.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank those of you who provided suggestions and comments to the environmental assessment. Your help has been invaluable in preparing the analysis and the alternative selection.

A Record of Decision is enclosed with this completed environmental assessment. The Record of Decision outlines the decision and the rationale that was used to determine the selected alternative, as well as the environmental stipulations that will be made a part of the authorization to conduct the engineering survey.

Sincerely,

Karl J. Wright
Acting Area Manager,
Bock Cliffs Resource Area

DECISION RECORD AND FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
FOR THE PROPOSED OURAY TO CISCO HIGHWAY SURVEY
THROUGH THE WINTER RIDGE AND FLUME CANYON
WILDERNESS STUDY AREAS

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT NO. 1991-39

Decision:

After careful consideration of the information in Environmental Assessment 1991-39, and the public comments on the EA, I have decided to approve the Uintah and Grand County Transportation Special Service Districts' (TSSDs) request to survey a proposed highway alternative which passes through the Winter Ridge WSA and on the perimeter of the Flume Canyon WSA. The following stipulations will apply:

1. Within seven (7) days after the survey is complete and aerial photography has been done, all survey materials will be removed, except the control points. The control points, which would consist of rebar and lath, would remain for no more than three (3) years unless the area becomes wilderness or the alternative is no longer being considered, at which time the control points would be removed.
2. Immediately after removing the survey materials, the TSSDs will notify the Book Cliffs Resource Area Manager so that the wilderness non-impairment criteria of the Interim Management Policy (IMP) can be verified.

Rationale:

The proposed action is in conformance with the Book Cliffs and Grand Resource Area Resource Management Plans. It also conforms to the IMP for WSA's because it meets the non-impairment standards criteria since all survey materials would eventually be removed.

Finding of No Significant Impact:

I have determined that the approval of the action selected will not have a significant adverse impact on the human environment and that an environmental impact statement is not required.


Karl J. Wright
Acting Area Manager

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
OF THE PROPOSED OURAY TO CISCO HIGHWAY
SURVEY THROUGH THE WINTER RIDGE AND
FLUME CANYON WILDERNESS STUDY AREAS
EA 1991 - 39

I. INTRODUCTION

The Uintah and Grand County, Utah, Transportation Special Service Districts have proposed the construction of a new state highway from Ouray to Cisco, Utah. Currently, this proposed project is being analyzed as an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The route is proposed through Winter Ridge Wilderness Study Area UT-080-730 and Flume Canyon Wilderness Study Area (WSA's) UT-060-100B (see maps 1 and 2). In order to complete engineering surveys in these WSA's, the BLM has determined that an Environmental Assessment (EA) is necessary to determine non-impairment of wilderness values and impact analysis to any related resources. The Transportation Special Service Districts are working through U.S. Congressional Representatives to have WSA status congressionally removed in its entirety from Winter Ridge and partially (one mile) from Flume Canyon in order to permit eventual highway construction.

This EA considers only the field engineering in both WSA's. The complete construction project will be analyzed in an EIS, now in progress.

II. PROPOSED ACTION

The proposal consists of a preliminary route survey, setting lath and rebar on center line, placing panel markers for aerial photography, a survey crew running control to the panels, and field examination by geologists. The work would be accomplished without surface disturbance or use of vehicles inside the WSA, with the exception of the existing road along Pretty Valley Ridge. Upon completion of the survey, all materials would be removed, with the exception of the lath and rebar which would be left in place until it is determined if the WSA status is removed by Congressional action. Should the WSA status not be removed, the remaining survey materials would be removed by the proponent.

The purpose and need of the proposal is to accomplish preliminary highway centerline design so a preferred alternative can be formulated and then analyzed in the forthcoming EIS. The EIS will analyze construction alternatives for the entire highway proposal.

Map 1

Winter Ridge WSA

UT-080-730

T. 14 S.

T. 15 S.

Legend

Proposed Centerline of Road



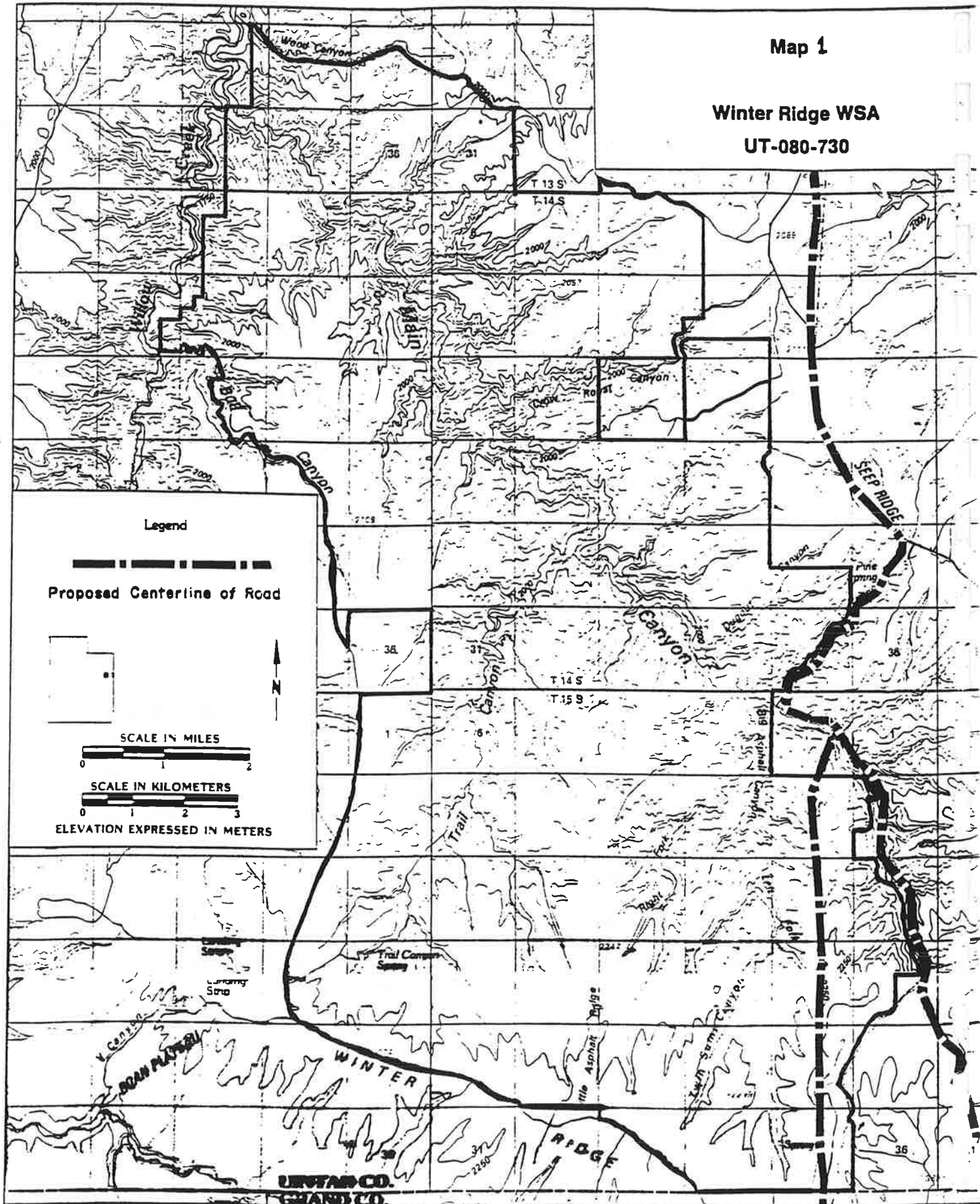
SCALE IN MILES



SCALE IN KILOMETERS

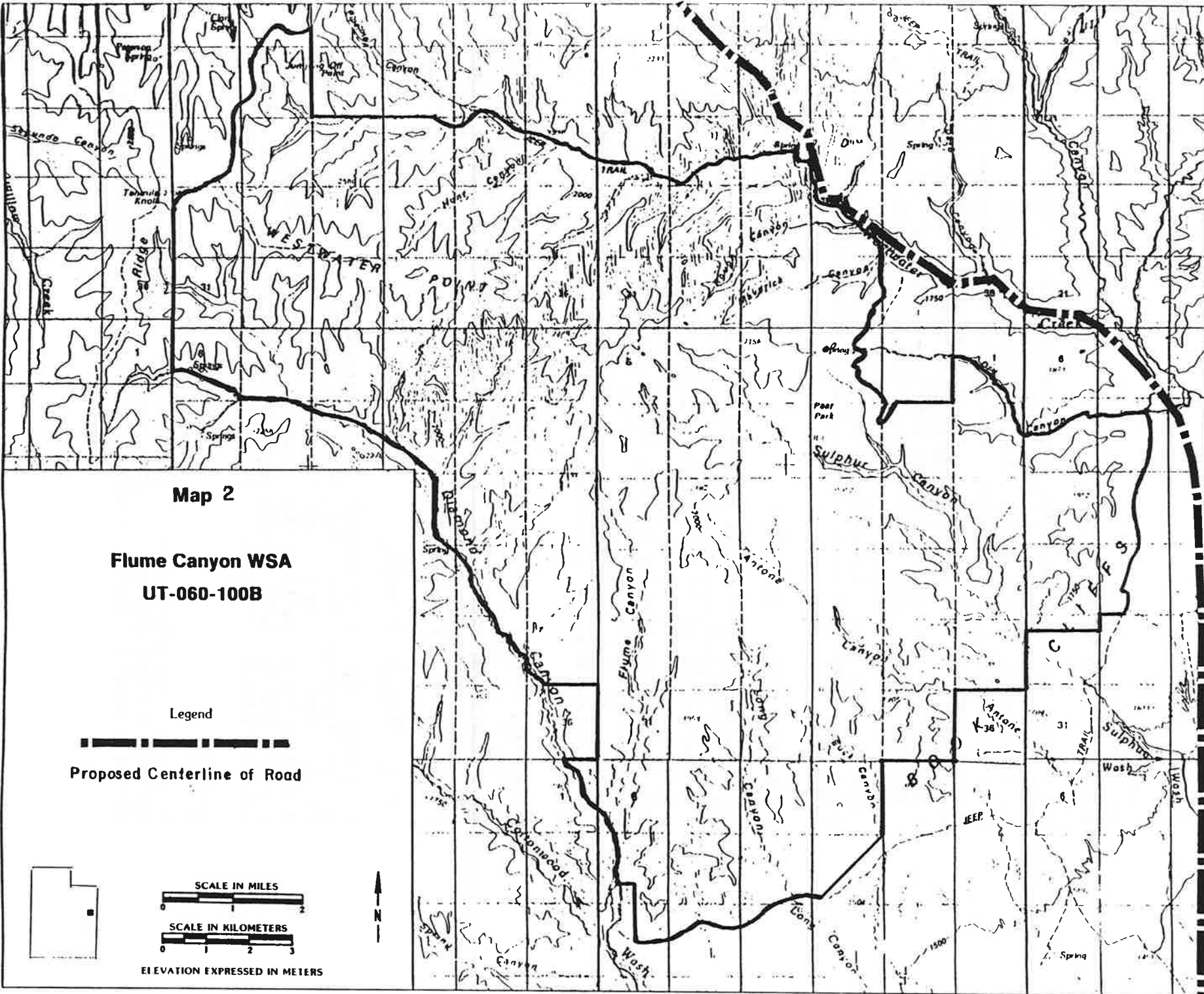


ELEVATION EXPRESSED IN METERS



R. 23 E.

R. 22 E.



Map 2

Flume Canyon WSA
UT-060-100B

Legend



 Proposed Centerline of Road



ELEVATION EXPRESSED IN METERS



III. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

Wilderness

Winter Ridge WSA (UT-080-730)

The Winter Ridge Wilderness Study Area (WSA) consists of 42,462 acres of public land (Map 1). Rectangular in shape, the unit averages 5 miles wide and 12 miles long. Opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation exist for day hiking, backpacking, horseback riding and big game hunting. However, none of these activities are considered outstanding. Total recreation use for the WSA is estimated to be about 435 visitor days annually. Solitude is influenced by pre-FLPMA oil and gas activities within this unit. About 10,565 acres of the unit do not have outstanding solitude. In the remaining 31,897 acres of the unit, which includes the proposed survey route, opportunities for solitude are considered outstanding. The Unit has not been recommended for Wilderness designation by BLM.

Flume Canyon WSA (UT-060-100B)

The Flume Canyon WSA consists of 50,800 acres of public land (Map 2). The WSA is of irregular configuration, roughly 14 miles east-west and 10.5 miles north-south at its widest point. Outstanding opportunities for primitive-type recreation are present throughout the WSA. The WSA provides opportunities for hunting, hiking, backpacking, camping and rock scrambling. The total recreational use is less than 350 visitor days annually. The WSA provides outstanding opportunities for solitude by virtue of its rugged topography and isolated nature throughout its 50,800 acres.

Engineering survey (Proposed Action) would occur only on the existing road (see Map 2) at the perimeter of the WSA. Therefore, wilderness values would remain unaffected. However, actual construction is proposed inside the WSA boundary. This will be analyzed in the upcoming Ouray & Cisco Highway EIS, and is beyond the scope of this Environmental Assessment (EA).

Land Use Plans and Controls

The Winter Ridge WSA is managed in accordance with the BLM Book Cliffs Resource Management Plan (RMP) (1984). The current BLM planning document for the Flume Canyon WSA is the Grand RMP (1983). Wilderness designation is part of the BLM multiple-use concept and the BLM land use plans are linked to the Utah BLM Statewide Wilderness EIS (1990). Both WSAs are currently administered under the BLM Interim Management Policy (IMP).

Wildlife

The Winter Ridge WSA contains diverse habitat capable of supporting numerous wildlife species, including several endangered species and species of special concern. However, no threatened or endangered species

are year-round residents of the WSA. The American peregrine falcon and bald eagle may pass through the area during spring and fall migrations, but are not known to nest in the study area. The golden eagle, protected under the Bald Eagle Protection Act, nests in the steep-walled slopes of Main Canyon.

Other special status species (category 2) that could occur in the WSA are the ferruginous hawk, Mexican spotted owl, and the long-billed curlew. It is unknown if these species occur as visitors or if they breed within the area.

No threatened, endangered, or species of special concern would be affected by the Proposed Action or No Action as the increased level of human activity associated with these alternatives would be insufficient to significantly impact these species in the short term.

No long term impacts are anticipated to these species because there would be no surface disturbance associated with the alternatives discussed in this EA.

Cultural and Paleontological Resources

A review of the Vernal Districts cultural resource management files was completed in June 1991. No cultural or paleontological sites have been identified in the proposed survey area.

If wilderness management guidelines are followed during the survey, there would be no affect to the cultural or paleontological resources even if these resources were to be found in the area.

Vegetation

Based on a review of the Book Cliffs special status plant species inventory (Sinclair, June 1991), no special status plant species or habitat would be affected by the proposed road survey or the No Action alternative.

IV. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

A. Proposed Action

Wilderness

Winter Ridge WSA

Temporary adverse impacts would occur in Winter Ridge WSA to solitude and naturalness. Non-permanent survey lath, rebar and panel markers would be noticeable for approximately one-quarter (1/4) mile from the centerline route (see Map 1). Vehicles used in the survey could be seen along the existing road on Pretty Valley Ridge. However, because all survey materials would eventually be removed by the proponent, the action would be non-impairing and the WSA would then meet all non-impairment criteria.

Land Use Plans and Controls

The Proposed Action would be in conformance with the Book Cliffs and Grand RMPs. The Proposed Action would also conform with the IMP because it would meet the standards of non-impairment criteria.

B. No Action

Wilderness

Winter Ridge WSA

The roadless portion (project area) of Winter Ridge WSA would probably continue to be unimpaired. The Main Canyon portion (outside the project area) could experience additional development on existing pre-FLPMA leases.

Land Use Plans and Controls

The No Action Alternative would be in conformance with the Book Cliffs and Grand RMPs. No Action would continue the non-impairment criteria of the IMP.

V. INTENSITY OF PUBLIC INTEREST

The issue of surveying for a proposed new highway inside Winter Ridge WSA and at the perimeter of Flume Canyon WSA has caused strong interest in these areas by the environmental community. Local and Wasatch Front news media have given major coverage of this proposal and consider it to be of high public interest.

Additionally, opposition to either route being surveyed through or adjacent to Winter Ridge WSA is being voiced by a landowner because highway construction would adversely impact his nearby ranch properties. This issue is beyond the scope of this EA, but will be considered in the Ouray-to-Cisco Highway EIS now in progress.

VI. ISSUES AND RESPONSES

On July 11, 1991, the original EA was sent out for public comment with an August 14, 1991, comment deadline. A review of the comments revealed there were some technical deficiencies in the EA which have now been corrected and, also, there was more opposition to allowing a survey of the proposed road alternative discussed in this EA than was expected.

Approximately 50 copies of the EA were distributed by mail and across the counter to various individuals, organizations, and government agencies. From the copies circulated, eight (8) comments were received. Table 1 lists the respondents to the original EA and the Issues and Responses section responds to issues made during the public comment period.

TABLE 1

COMMENTS

<u>Individual</u>	<u>Representing</u>	<u>Location</u>
Jane Leeson	The Wilderness Society	Salt Lake City, UT
William George	Self	Germantown, MD.
Stephen Borton	Uintah Mountain Club	Vernal, UT
Lynn Casavan	Self	Moab, UT
Scott Groene	SUWA	Moab, UT
Will Durrant	Uintah Mountain Club	Vernal, UT
Mark MacAllister	Sierra Club	Salt Lake City, UT
George Nickas	Utah Wilderness Association	Salt Lake City, UT

Issue: Allowing a survey through the Winter Ridge and Flume Canyon WSA's is against the interim management policies for WSA's. No disturbance from surveying or the use of motorized vehicles to transport survey equipment should be allowed.

Response: The BLM Interim Management Policy states that "any activity that BLM has determined does not impair the land's suitability for preservation as wilderness may be permitted on lands under wilderness review". The purpose of this EA is to determine if the proposal meets nonimpairment criteria. Because of the limited activities in the proposed action, BLM analysis demonstrates that the proposal does meet the nonimpairment standard.

Issue: Impacts to threatened and endangered (T & E) species (plants and animals) as well as cultural and paleontological resources was not covered adequately. A brief literature or file search on these resources does not do an adequate job of impact assessment.

Response: BLM determined that an intensive survey for T & E species, cultural resources, and paleontological resources was not necessary because of the minimal affect a survey would have on these resources. Virtually no surface disturbance would occur from the proposal.

Issue: A nonimpairing alternative was not analyzed.

Response: Because of the limited activity contained in the proposal, BLM determined the only other reasonable alternative was the no action alternative.

Issue: The EA was in error when it stated that the Winter Ridge and Flume Canyon WSA's are not generally considered as high priority areas by the environmental community for inclusion into an eventual Utah Wilderness System.

Response: BLM acknowledges that the proposal has resulted in high interest in these areas by the environmental community.

Issue: The EA should not have been written since an ongoing EIS of the Ouray to Cisco Highway is already in progress. The EIS should run its course before other alternatives are discussed in a piecemeal EA. This EA confuses the issue of the Ouray to Cisco Highway.

Response: The introduction of this EA explains that the construction phase of this project in its entirety will be analyzed in a forthcoming EIS. In order for the Transportation Special Service Districts to develop their preferred alternative for this EIS, engineering materials must be placed within Winter Ridge WSA prior to writing the EIS. However, before this surveying activity can be permitted, an evaluation of the nonimpairment standard contained in the Bureau's Interim Management Policy must be made; therefore, the procedural need for this EA.

Issue: The EA states that WSA's are being managed in accordance with the RMP's, but no specific references can be found in the RMP's to back this up.

Response: Management references specific to Winter Ridge WSA can be found in Chapter 2 (page 15) of the Final EIS, Book Cliffs Resource Management Plan, November 1984.

Issue: The decision to prepare an EA for a segment of the project rather than include it in the EIS is a violation of NEPA.

Response: Interim management policy and guidelines for lands under wilderness review outlines evaluation procedures (chapter II, part B, of H-8550-1) to be used with the proposal contained in this EA. This document states "the information needed to reach conclusions on the nonimpairment criteria...will be documented in the environmental assessment or environmental impact statement that is routinely prepared for every proposed action on public lands, except those covered by categorical exclusions". Additionally, the environmental assessment acknowledges that an EIS is currently being prepared for the construction phase of the project in its entirety.

Issue: There is no discussion in the EA of the need or lack of need for the project.

Response: A "purpose and need" paragraph has been added to the Proposed Action in the EA.

Issue: There is no need for the Ouray to Cisco Highway. Existing roads from Moab to Vernal are already in place and are adequate to handle the transportation needs.

Response: This issue is beyond scope of this EA but will be covered in the Ouray to Cisco Highway EIS.

VIII. LIST OF PREPARERS

Byron Tolman
Duane DePaepe
William Stroh
Blaine Phillips
Jean Nitschke-Sinclear

Team Leader
Wilderness
Wildlife
Cultural Resources and Paleontology
Threatened & Endangered Plants

