

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

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ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
OF THE PROPOSED OURAY TO CISCO
ROAD 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. Congressman Bill Orton 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.

III. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

Wilderness

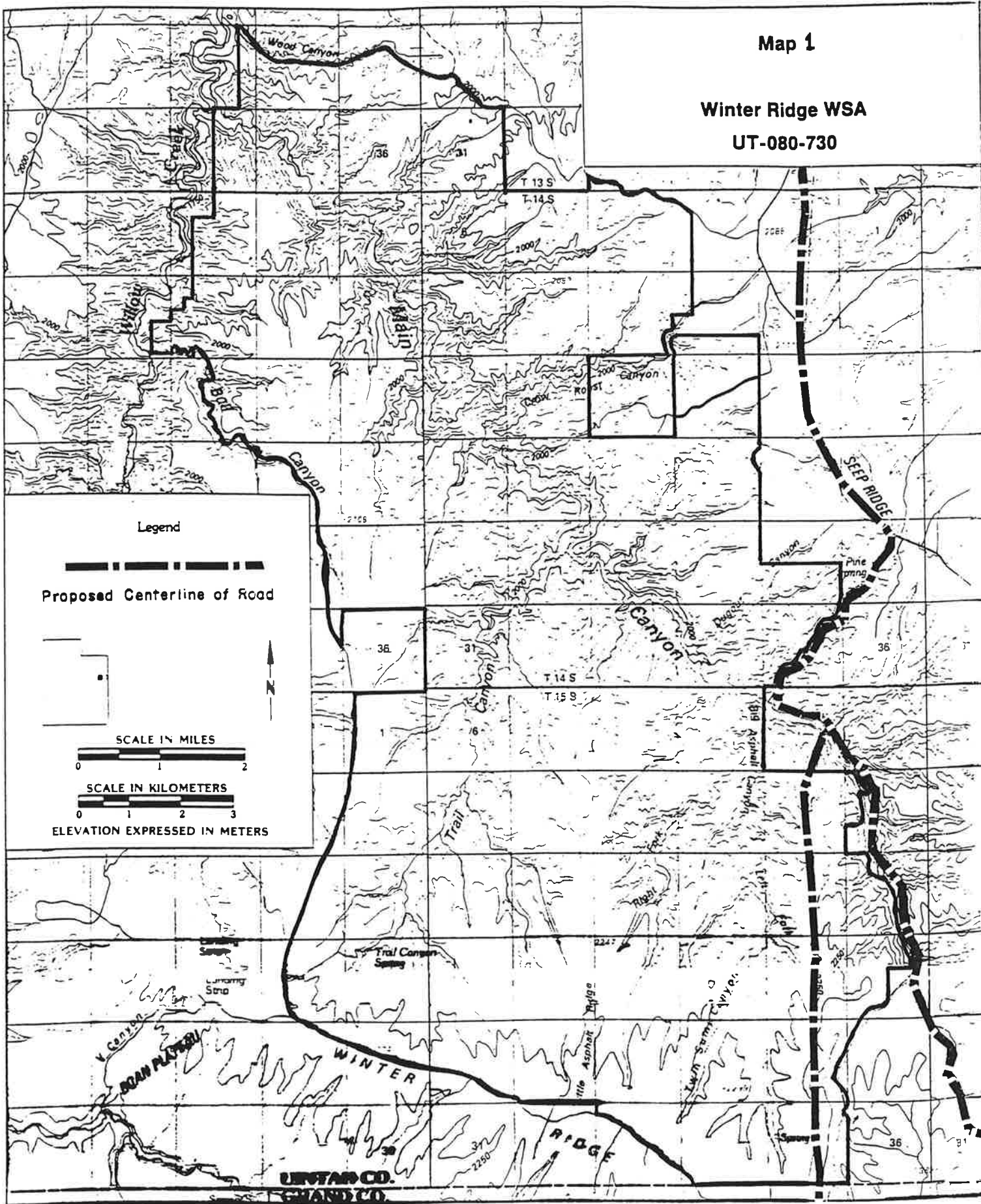
Winter Ridge WSA (UT-080-730)

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

Map 1

Winter Ridge WSA

UT-080-730



Legend

Proposed Centerline of Road



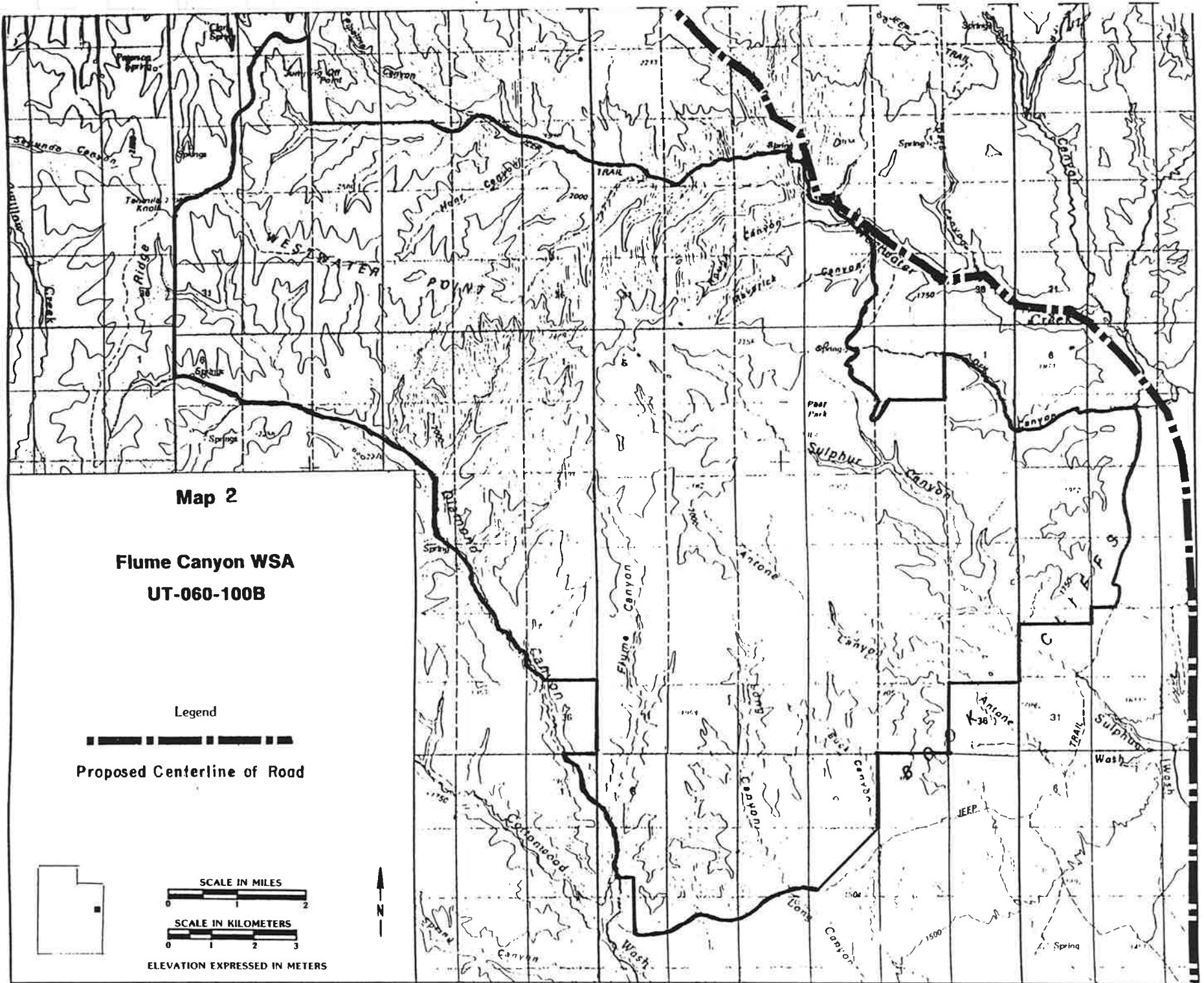
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exist for day hiking, backpacking, horseback riding and big game hunting. However, none of these activities are considered outstanding. Total recreation use for the WSA is estimated to be about 435 visitor days annually. Solitude is influenced by pre-FLPMA 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 Plan (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 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 by Blaine Phillips 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, no impact would be made 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. 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 IMP.

V. INTENSITY OF PUBLIC INTEREST

Both WSAs currently experience low visitor use and are not generally considered as high priority areas by the environmental community for inclusion into an eventual Utah Wilderness system. However, controversy over this action could occur because of opposition to the overall highway project or because of the precedent of possible elimination of WSA status to Winter Ridge and Flume Canyon WSA's before the entire state wilderness package is considered by Congress and the President.

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 & Cisco Highway EIS, now in progress.

VI. RELATED IMPACTS BEYOND THE SCOPE OF THIS EA

Should either route be approved as depicted in this EA, ranch properties by one owner would be adversely impacted by eventual highway construction. This issue is beyond the scope of this EA, but will be addressed in the Ouray & Cisco Highway EIS, now in progress.

VII. LIST OF PREPARERS

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