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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Rocky Mountain Region / Black Hills National Forest

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Black Hills National Forest

Draft Forest Assessment:

Potential Wilderness Inventory Process Summary



Existing Black Elk Wilderness. U.S. Forest Service photo.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

What is an Assessment Report?

The Black Hills National Forest is managed by the U.S. Forest Service, an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The mission of the Forest Service is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. The National Forest Management Act requires all National Forests to develop a land and resource management plan (forest plan) in order to guide management actions and decisions. The current Black Hills NF forest plan was approved in 1997 and has been amended twice. The revision process includes identifying and evaluating lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS) and determining whether to recommend to the Chief of the Forest Service any such lands for wilderness designation. A description of this process can be found in the 2012 Forest Service Planning Rule and Chapter 70 of the Forest Service Land Management Planning Handbook 1909.12. This process includes the following four steps:

1. Identify and inventory all lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System.
2. Evaluate the wilderness characteristics of each area based on a given set of criteria.
3. The Forest Supervisor will determine which areas to further analyze in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process.
4. The Forest Supervisor will decide which areas, if any, to recommend for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS).

Lands evaluated and analyzed through this process and the resulting NEPA analysis are only preliminary administrative recommendations; Congress has reserved the authority to make final decisions on wilderness designation.

Resource Overview

This document summarizes the first step in the process outlined above for potential wilderness in the Black Hills National Forest.

Chapter 2. Resource Assessment

Inventory of Lands already included in the NWPS

The Black Hills National Forest is home to one congressionally designated wilderness area, the Black Elk Wilderness, covering 15,354-acres, or 1.1% of the Forest. First established as part of the Norbeck Wildlife Preserve in 1920, was designated by Congress in 1980 through the Colorado Wilderness Act and is managed by the Hell Canyon Ranger District.

The Black Elk Wilderness is named after an Oglala Lakota spiritual leader and is sacred to many American Indians. Precambrian rock formations and thick ponderosa pine forests create ample climbing and hiking opportunities, making it a very popular recreation area for locals and tourists. Prominent landmarks within the wilderness include the highest point in the United States east of the Rocky Mountains, Black Elk Peak (7,244').

Inventory of Lands that may be Suitable for Inclusion in the NWPS

The Black Hills National Forest interdisciplinary team (please see Appendix A for a list of members) began identifying and inventorying lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the NWPS using the size, adjacency, and road improvements criteria outlined in the Forest Service Handbook. See FSH 1909.12 Chapter 70, 71.21 and 71.22a.

Inventory Process and Criteria

1. Initial screening

- Private in-holdings were removed from National Forest System land.
- FS Roads (U.S. Forest Service, 2021) Maintenance Level 2 through 5 were buffered 50' (100' corridor) and removed. See FS Road Maintenance Definitions.
- Pipelines, overhead powerlines, and underground powerlines (U.S. Forest Service, 2021) were buffered 50' (100' corridor) and excluded from the inventory areas.
- Areas of mineral rights (U.S. Forest Service, 2021) that suggest substantially noticeable modifications in the area were removed.
- All tree removal activities from any year were removed (U.S. Forest Service, 2021).

2. Acreages of areas were then calculated, and the following size classes were maintained for further consideration:

- An area greater than 5,000 acres.
- An area adjacent to existing wilderness regardless of size.
- A standalone area in unimpaired condition (not adjacent to existing wilderness) that is less than 5,000 acres that can be effectively managed and preserved as a separate unit of NWPS.

Following the initial screening steps, all unauthorized/user-created routes were removed from the inventory because they are not part of the official road system. Those routes will be considered in the evaluation phase as part of the apparent naturalness and degree to which the area may be managed to preserve its wilderness characteristics.

Finally, non-wilderness activities or uses adjacent to the inventory area does not disqualify an inventoried area from evaluation. Therefore, the inventory does include areas adjacent to development and/or activities that impact opportunities for solitude.

Inventory Results

The resulting areas and acres are summarized in table 1. The overall results include the following:

- One stand-alone area, Inyan Kara, is less than 5,000 acres. Inyan Kara was included due to its isolation, remoteness, and inaccessibility (U.S. Forest Service, 2007)
- Other areas less than 5,000 acres in size were included because they are adjacent to Black Elk Wilderness
- Forestwide, 38,353 acres are included in the final wilderness inventory map.

Table 1. Wilderness inventory results

Inventory Polygon	Ranger District	Size	Acres	Comment
01	Bearlodge Ranger District	Larger than 5K acres	5,627.23	
02	Bearlodge Ranger District	Larger than 5K acres	12,388.81	Sand Creek roadless area
03	Northern Hills Ranger District	Larger than 5K acres	5,212.33	Beaver Park roadless area
04	Hell Canyon Ranger District	Wilderness Adjacent	1,295.02	
05	Hell Canyon Ranger District	Wilderness Adjacent	184.45	
06	Hell Canyon Ranger District	Wilderness Adjacent	94.81	
07	Hell Canyon Ranger District	Wilderness Adjacent	7.18	
08	Hell Canyon Ranger District	Wilderness Adjacent	1,656.02	
09	Hell Canyon Ranger District	Wilderness Adjacent	14.11	
10	Hell Canyon Ranger District	Larger than 5K acres	5,142.36	
11	Hell Canyon Ranger District	Larger than 5K acres	5,421.46	
12	Bearlodge Ranger District	Smaller than 5K acres	1,308.74	Inyan Kara roadless area

The wilderness inventory results map (figure 1, and appendix C) shows the results of the inventory along with the existing Black Elk Wilderness, which is currently the only designated wilderness area in Black Hills National Forest and roadless areas, defined as “any area, without the presence of a classified road, of a size and configuration sufficient to protect the inherent characteristics associated with its roadless condition” (36 CFR 219.36). There are currently approximately 30,000 acres of inventoried roadless designated areas within the Black Hills National Forest, with 38,353 acres identified as possible wilderness (table 1).

Lands shown on figure 1 do not imply designation or necessarily convey or require a particular kind of management, and inclusion or removal of any of these lands are open to discussion.

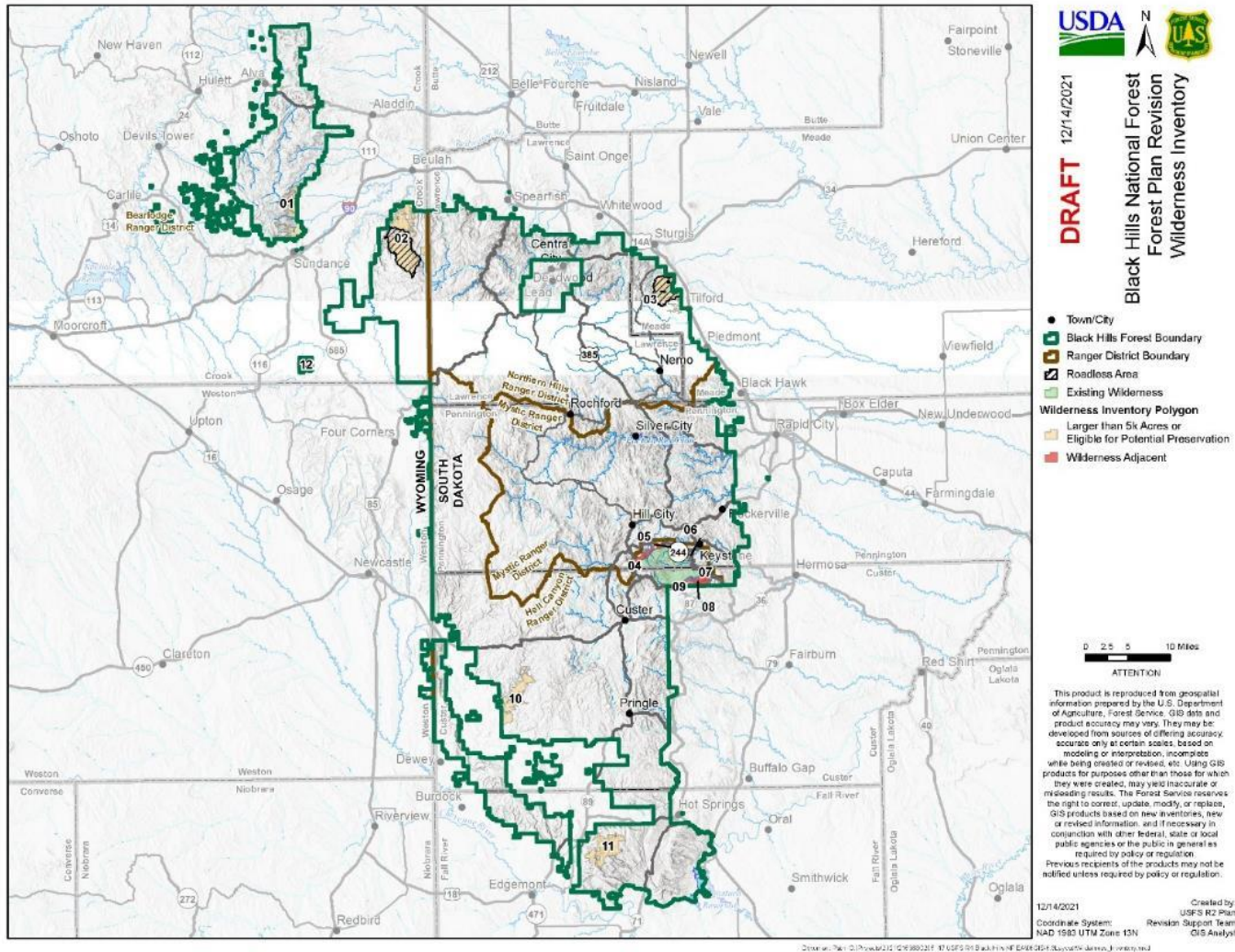


Figure 1. Wilderness inventory results

Chapter 3. Public Participation in the Planning Process

Placeholder section for future public involvement to denote when meetings were held and general feedback provided. A full set of comments will be included in Appendix B of this summary.

Next Steps

Chapter 4. Conclusions

Evaluation

The next step in wilderness recommendation process is to evaluate each area on the inventory map for wilderness characteristics. Evaluation of wilderness characteristics is done using five criteria set forth in the Wilderness Act of 1964 and required in the Forest Service Handbook final directives FSH 1909.12, Chapter 70, Section 72.1. A summary of these five criteria is as follows:

- Evaluate the degree to which the area generally appears to be affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprints of man's work substantially unnoticeable (apparent naturalness).
- Evaluate the degree to which the area has outstanding opportunities for solitude or for a primitive and unconfined type of recreation. The word "or" means that an area only has to possess one or the other. The area does not have to possess outstanding opportunities for both elements, nor does it need to have outstanding opportunities on every acre.
- Evaluate how an area of less than 5,000 acres is of sufficient size to make its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition practicable.
- Evaluate the degree to which an area may contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value. These values are not required in an area to be present, but their presence should be identified and evaluated where they exist.
- Evaluate the degree to which the area may be managed to preserve its wilderness characteristics.

Over the next several months, each area of the inventory will be evaluated for these criteria based on direction from the FSH 1909.12 Chapter 70. Supporting information that is identified during the evaluation phase will be used to evaluate and assess the area as a whole.

Analysis and Recommendation

Following the evaluation phase, the Forest Supervisor will decide, based on evaluation and public input, which areas, or portions thereof, will be considered for wilderness designation in draft forest plan and alternatives. Comments will be used to make adjustments to be included in the forest plan revision and draft environmental impact statement.

Once the forest plan is finalized, the final environmental impact statement is released, and a record of decision is signed, the Black Hills NF Forest Supervisor may recommend suitable lands for NWPS designation to the Chief of the U.S. Forest Service. Such recommendation may then be forwarded to the Secretary of Agriculture, and ultimately to Congress, for their consideration and possible designation. Congress has reserved the authority to make final decisions on wilderness designation.

References Cited

- U.S. Forest Service. Black Hills National Forest Forest-wide Travel Analysis Report 2007
https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd527395.pdf
- U.S. Forest Service. 2021. GIS data 2021. Personal communication with Natalie Heberling, Rocky Mountain Regional Office GIS specialist.
- U.S. Forest Service. Wilderness inventory meeting with Black Hills National Forest Interdisciplinary team, November 16, 2021.

Appendix A. Black Hills National Forest Interdisciplinary Team

Table 2. Black Hills National Forest interdisciplinary team

Name	Affiliation and Title
Louie Conroy	Project Manager
Don Yasuda	Assistant Project Manager
Sara Erickson	Recreation Planner
Natalie Heberling	R2 Planning Team, GIS
Brian Taylor	GIS

Appendix B. Public Comment Summary and Response

Appendix C. Map

The following map is provided as a separate PDF document on the forest plan revision [assessment webpage](#) for the Black Hills National Forest.

Map 1. Wilderness inventory map