Preserving New Mexico Traditions in the Pecos Wilderness

Incorporating the adjacent roadless areas into the existing Pecos Wilderness and designating some places as special management areas would continue to protect traditional users’ rights and the customary uses of the lands and waters.

Current Grazing Will Continue in Wilderness

- Livestock grazing currently occurs in the Pecos Wilderness. Grazing that occurs today in the proposed additions to the Pecos Wilderness will continue if the area is designated as wilderness.

- Congressional direction on grazing in wilderness areas is very well established. The Wilderness Act of 1964 permits grazing to continue in wilderness and there are established guidelines for managing grazing in wilderness. Today, most wilderness legislation includes language directing that grazing management should follow the Congressional guidelines that reinforce section 4(d)(4)(2) of the Wilderness Act, which states that “the grazing of livestock, where established prior to the effective date of this Act, shall be permitted to continue subject to such reasonable regulations as are deemed necessary by the Secretary of Agriculture.”

1 The Wilderness Act, section 4d | 2 House of Representatives 96-617

In the committee report accompanying 1980 legislation designating wilderness in several western states (PL 96-560), the House Interior and Insular Affairs Committee developed comprehensive guidance on grazing in National Forest Wilderness.

In short, this guidance emphasizes that grazing should not be curtailed simply because an area is designated wilderness; facilities may be maintained; new improvements and facilities should be focused on resource protection; and motorized equipment should be used sparingly, and mostly in emergency situations or where permitted prior to designation.

“My family has run cattle and sheep in the area for three generations. Our water comes from the high mountain peaks of the Pecos Wilderness and expanding these areas will not only protect my allotment from development, but also will keep it available in its current state for my grandchildren and those who will follow.”

Floyd Ricardo Fresquez
Pecos Wilderness Grazing Permittee
Mora County

Photos: Grazing in Wilderness, courtesy of The Wilderness Society | Fishing in Trampas Lake, courtesy of Nick Streit | New Mexico Acequia, Flickr
Hunting and Fishing Traditions Thrive

- Hunting and fishing in places like the Pecos are time-tested and important traditions in New Mexico. For centuries, sportsmen have been a leading part of the movement to conserve wildlife and wildlands. This tradition would continue in the incorporated roadless areas surrounding the existing Pecos Wilderness.
- Hunting, fishing, horseback riding, hiking, camping, canoeing and other non-mechanized outdoor recreation are permitted in wilderness areas.
- The Pecos Wilderness and surrounding lands are critical habitat for elk, deer, bear, turkey, and one of America’s most robust herds of Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep. Its waters are home to the rainbow and brown trout, as well as New Mexico’s state fish – the Rio Grande cutthroat trout.
- Wildlife prospers in wilderness because it safeguards America’s cleanest water and wildest lands. In the Pecos, wilderness helps protect prime habitat for fish and wildlife, safeguarding cold-water fisheries and a fragile high-alpine ecosystem. Game populations generally prosper and wildlife habitat is maintained naturally.

Protecting Water Quality and Customs

- Acequias (traditional irrigation canals) and acequia associations are a cultural heritage in New Mexico that value uncontaminated and freely flowing water systems for irrigation and growing healthy crops. Several acequia associations in Northern New Mexico rely on clean water from the rivers and streams that originate in the existing Pecos Wilderness and its adjacent roadless areas.
- There are no acequias, headgates or other infrastructure located within the existing or proposed wilderness areas. The roadless areas that are proposed for special management area designation would be protected from development while honoring the existing traditional uses that currently occur. Thus, special management area designations will not restrict access or limit maintenance or improvements to the irrigation infrastructure.
- Many communities in New Mexico were granted land that included mountains, pastures, and water, along with communal use rights, including but not limited to hunting (caza), pasture (pastos), and watering (acequias and abrevederos). The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo guaranteed the property rights associated with these land grants, and generations of land grant heirs have survived off the land with these resources. Wilderness protects hunting, watersheds, pasture, and other traditional values and resources for present and future generations.

Frequently Asked Questions

Can I gather traditional herbs?
Yes, all existing rights will be preserved. Just as on all Forest Service land, collection of medicinal plants and traditional herbs in wilderness areas can be secured through Forest Service permits.

Will access to sacred sites be affected?
All existing rights will be preserved. Access will remain unchanged and sites will be protected.

Can I cut or gather firewood?
Fuelwood cutting and gathering likely does not currently occur in the proposed wilderness and special management areas because of the steep terrain and absence of roads. To the extent that any fuelwood cutting and gathering may be occurring in the proposal area, upon designation as wilderness, this use would be limited to dead or down wood for personal use and an individual must use hand tools when cutting and gathering.