

Wild Times Ahead Regarding Wild Lands



Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar at UNLV last summer

Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar recently signed Secretarial Order 3310 directing the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to find areas under its jurisdiction that have wilderness characteristics, designate them as “Wild Lands” and then manage them for these wilderness characteristics.

These will not be wilderness areas, which can only be created by Congress. Wild Lands are also separate from Wilderness Study Areas which await either Congressional approval to make them wilderness or remove them as study areas. Wild Lands will be created within the BLM in conjunction with a resource management plan.

Keep in mind that this is very new and much of its inner workings are still unknown. Two ways will exist for federal lands to become designated as Wild Lands. A rancher might walk into the BLM office, wanting to add a fence to his grazing allotment to improve control over his cattle. The BLM office is required by the Secretarial Order to first look at the federal land in question to see if it offers wilderness characteristics. The land must encompass at least 5,000 contiguous acres, basically land not cut up by roads. Second, the land must exhibit certain wilderness characteristics including naturalness where human made features are fairly unnoticeable. It must offer opportunity for solitude and for unconfined recreation. One rather nebulous characteristic is the land must look natural to a visitor not necessarily familiar with the area. An exaggerated example would be when a Nevadan sees a landscape dominated by Hoary Cress, a noxious weed. As long as an uninformed visitor enjoys the pretty, white flowers covering the landscape, this land might qualify.

Land meeting these qualifications would be designated “Lands with Wilderness Characteristics”. Later, through an open and transparent land use planning process, the land could be designated Wild Lands and then managed in a way to ensure its wilderness characteristics are not diminished.

The presence of grazing would not disqualify land from such a designation and would probably not be prohibited on Wild Lands, but new changes to the land such as landscape improvement projects would most likely not be allowed. Mining might not be allowed. Existing structures such as fences would not disqualify the land, but the rancher’s new fence would almost certainly not be allowed. In the case of a wildfire in a Wild Lands area, it could be treated like a Wilderness Study Area where fire fighting is designated as minimal impact.

Any individual can propose an area for consideration. They would need to show evidence why the land in question should be considered for Wild Lands status, but the BLM would then be required to consider the proposal. The BLM concedes this process could and probably would be used by groups to slow development on federal land and encumber BLM personnel. Again, this was a Secretarial Order with little or no input from state and local BLM offices.

BLM personnel recently looked at Elko BLM district maps and found 278 areas of federal land having at least 5,000 contiguous acres. However, without studying these areas they cannot say how many of them possess the necessary wilderness characteristics. In 1979, the same area was searched for wilderness characteristics and only ten areas were designated Wilderness Study Areas. My guess is few sites in Elko County would be designated Wild Lands.

The Wild Lands Secretarial Order was enacted because the BLM has not had a national wilderness policy since 2003, when it was revoked as part of a court case with the state of Utah. Secretary Salazar considers this as a way of setting aside “wilderness-like” areas since Congress is not designating actual wilderness areas. He sees it as a common-sense policy for the protection of backcountry areas where Americans can recreate, find solitude and enjoy the wild.

Unfortunately, Wild Lands will become one more source of friction between Nevadans and the BLM.

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