

Proposed Lands With Wilderness Characteristics:

STEWART CANYON

Public Lands in Greenlee County, Arizona



A proposal report to the Bureau of Land Management,
Safford Field Office, Arizona
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Stewart Canyon Proposed LWC

PREFACE: This Proposal was developed according to BLM Manual 6310

General Overview

Instruction Memorandum 2011-154 and Manuals 6310 and 6320 set out the BLM's approach to protecting wilderness characteristics on the public lands. This guidance acknowledges that wilderness is a resource that is part of BLM's multiple use mission, requires the BLM to keep a current inventory of wilderness characteristics, and directs the agency to consider protection of these values in land use planning decisions.¹

In March 2012, the Bureau of Land Management issued updated manuals for inventorying and managing Lands with Wilderness Characteristics on public lands (hereafter often referred to as LWC's). These manuals provide the agency with direction for implementing its legal obligations to inventory and consider management of Lands with Wilderness Characteristics, including the Federal Land Policy and Management Act's provision that BLM "preserve and protect certain public lands in their natural condition" (43 U.S.C. § 1701(a)(8)).

Manual 6310 (Conducting Wilderness Characteristics Inventory on BLM Lands) guides the BLM on how to meet its obligations to inventory for and identify lands with wilderness characteristics. Manual 6320 (Considering Lands with Wilderness Characteristics in the BLM Land Use Planning Process) guides the BLM on the options available to address lands with wilderness characteristics in land use planning once they have been identified in the required inventory, such as putting management prescriptions in place to protect wilderness characteristics. The purpose of this report is to provide the BLM with recommendations for designation of Lands with Wilderness Characteristics in the Safford Resource Area of southeastern Arizona, based on new, accurate, and up-to-date information according to Manual 6310.²

What does Manual 6310 require for the identification of LWC's?

Minimum standard for LWC proposals are described in Manual 6310 in section .06.B.1. There are three things required in a citizen's wilderness proposal in order to meet the minimum standard for BLM to consider it in an inventory and to consider it as new information:

- Detailed map with specific boundaries;
- Detailed narrative of the wilderness characteristics; and
- Photographic documentation.

Once there is new information that meets these standards, then "as soon as practicable, the BLM shall evaluate the information," including field checking as needed and comparing with existing data to see if previous conclusions remain valid. Further, BLM will document its rationale and make it available to the public. (.06.B.2). This proposal report provides the three necessary criteria listed above.

What does Manual 6310 require for an area to be identified as an LWC?

Requirements for determining lands have wilderness characteristics are found in section .06.C.2 of Manual 6310. Lands with Wilderness Characteristics must possess the following traits:

- **Size** : Sufficient roadless area to satisfy size requirements (5,000 acres, of sufficient size to make management practicable or "any roadless island of the public lands"; or contiguous with Wilderness, Wilderness Study Areas, USFWS areas Proposed for Wilderness, Forest Service WSAs or areas of Recommended Wilderness, National Park Service areas Recommended or Proposed for Designation).
- **Naturalness**

1. Memorandum 2011-154 is available online at:

http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/info/regulations/Instruction_Memos_and_Bulletins/national_instruction/2011/IM_2011-154.html

2. Manual 6310 is available online at :

http://www.blm.gov/pgdata/etc/medialib/blm/wo/Information_Resources_Management/policy/blm_manual.Par.38337.File.dat/6310.pdf

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Affected primarily by the forces of nature – The criteria is “apparent naturalness” which depends on whether an area looks natural to “the average visitor who is not familiar with the biological composition of natural ecosystems versus human affected ecosystems.” This is an important distinction between ecological integrity and apparent naturalness.

Human impacts – Human impacts must be documented and some are acceptable so long as they are “substantially unnoticeable”; Examples include trails, bridges, fire rings, minor radio repeater sites, air quality monitoring devices, fencing, spring developments, and stock ponds. Outside human impacts – impacts outside the area are generally not considered, but major outside impacts should be noted and evaluated for direct effects on the entire area (the manual explicitly cautions BLM to “avoid an overly strict approach”).

• **Outstanding opportunities for either solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation:**

The area does not have to possess both opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation, nor does the area need to have outstanding opportunities on every acre; BLM cannot compare lands in question with other parcels; BLM cannot use any type of rating system or scale.

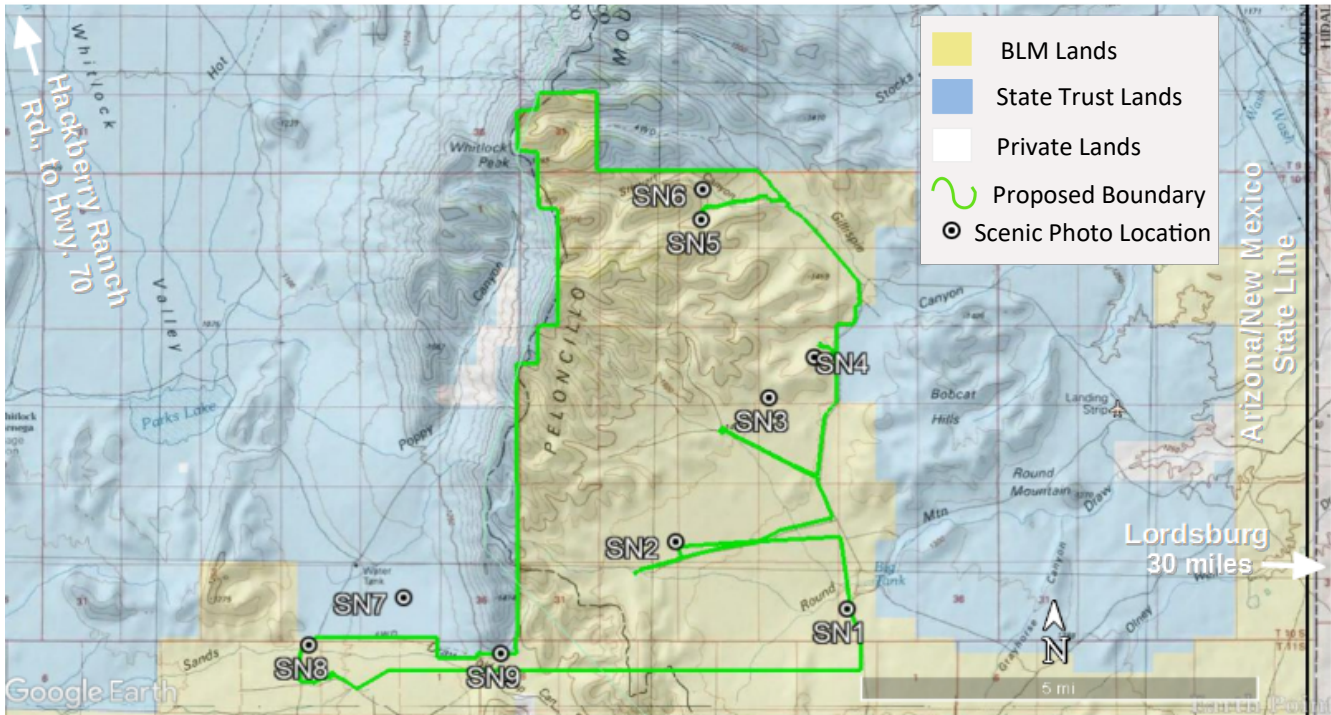
• **Supplemental values:** Ecological, geological, scientific, scenic, educational or historical features should be documented where they exist, although they are not required traits.

What does Manual 6310 require for the identification of the boundaries of an LWC?

Boundaries should be based on wilderness inventory roads and naturalness rather than opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation. For inventorying wilderness characteristics, BLM will use the “road” definition from FLPMA’s legislative history; the term “road” and “wilderness inventory road” are interchangeable in this guidance. The AWC survey team took a very literal, maintenance-driven approach to road/way determination.

- “Wilderness inventory roads” are routes which have been: (1) improved and maintained (when needed), (2) by mechanical means (but not solely by the passage of vehicles), (3) to insure relatively regular and continuous use.
- “Primitive routes” or “ways” are transportation linear features located within areas that have been identified as having wilderness characteristics and not meeting the wilderness inventory road definition.
- Lands between individual human impacts should not be automatically excluded from the area; no setbacks or buffers allowed; boundaries should be drawn to exclude developed rights-of-way; “undeveloped rights-of-way and similar possessory interests (e.g., as mineral leases) are not treated as impacts to wilderness characteristics because these rights may never be developed”; areas can have wilderness characteristics even though every acre within the area may not meet all the criteria.

Section 1: Overview of the Proposed LWC



Stewart Canyon Summary Map - The Stewart Canyon proposed LWC is located in southeastern Arizona, about 30 miles west of Lordsburg, NM and 30 miles southeast of Safford, AZ. The west side of the unit is primarily accessed by the Hackberry Ranch Rd., south from U.S. Hwy. 70. The east side is accessed via the Lazy B Ranch Road, also south from Hwy. 70. This unit is many miles from communities of any size – the closest being the tiny town of Duncan, AZ, more than 10 miles to the north. It is wild, remote country, with few human developments outside of some minor ranching infrastructure. There is no traffic noise or light pollution, and the nearest paved road is over 7 miles from the unit boundary.

The southeastern portion of the unit is a gently undulating plain at an elevation of around 4000 ft., composed of volcanic alluvium. It is vegetated by a combination of grasslands and Chihuahan scrub/shrub communities. The western and northern portions of the unit are dominated by the Peloncillo Mountains, a North/South oriented range with peaks ranging in elevation from 5000 to 6000 ft. The west slope of the range is formed by precipitous cliffs, towering over the Whitlock Valley nearly 2000 ft. below. The eastern slope is composed of a complex system of broad, windswept ridges and deep valleys/canyons. The unit's wilderness characteristics are most evident in this wild, rugged, and completely undeveloped terrain. Higher elevations are dominated by juniper woodlands, while valley bottoms have washes thick with mesquite and acacia. Topographic complexity creates a variety of microhabitats, harboring abundant biodiversity.

This is open country; the landforms are of massive scale, providing sweeping vistas for many miles and inviting unconfined exploration. Hiking, hunting, horseback riding, wildlife viewing, and rockhounding are all outstanding recreation opportunities.

Section 2: Documentation of Wilderness Characteristics

As presented in this report, the Stewart Canyon Proposed LWC meets the Size, Naturalness and Outstanding Opportunities for Solitude or Primitive Unconfined Recreation criteria laid out in BLM Manual 6310. This unit is an excellent candidate for LWC designation and management for the protection of wilderness values.

Size: The Stewart Canyon Proposed LWC consists of **16,600** contiguous roadless acres, easily exceeding the minimum 5,000 acres required for LWC designation. The majority of the unit boundary is the State Trust/BLM land boundary, with wilderness conditions existing on both sides and no obvious human barriers, so the unit feels a good deal larger than its actual size.

Naturalness:

In the Stewart Canyon proposed LWC, abundant native vegetation, wildlife, and dramatic volcanic terrain define the visitor experience – imparting a feeling of wild, untrammled, nature. This area is transitional between Sonoran and Chihuahan desert communities, and contains a variety of vegetation representative of each. Semi-desert grasslands, with scattered yucca and creosote stands, cover the lower elevations, while Chihuahan desert scrub communities, including prickly pear, ocotillo, and agave, blanket the lower slopes of the Peloncillos. On high ridges and north facing slopes, Madrean evergreen woodlands, here composed primarily of juniper, are dominant. The landscape in all directions is iconic, southeastern Arizona wilderness; broad, remote valleys, composed of grassy plains, punctuated by old, volcanic, mountain ranges.

The proposed LWC is governed primarily by the forces of nature, free of substantial human impacts, and appearing to be in a natural condition to the average visitor. The Peloncillo Mountains, occupying over a third of the unit, are completely wild, with dramatic natural scenery and no human impacts. In the lower, flatter terrain in the eastern part of the unit, there is some active ranching infrastructure associated with the nearby Lazy B Ranch. Most of these impacts have been excluded from the unit by the four cherrystem roads along the eastern unit boundary. Three of these cherrystems lead to dirt tanks that blend in with the terrain and minimally impact the surrounding unit's naturalness. The cherrystem at photopoint 005 (see Sections 3 and 4 for descriptions of photopoints) leads to a communications tower at 010, which does impact the wilderness quality of the immediate surroundings. This entire area, including the power lines to the tower has been excluded. The tower and power lines are not visible from the vast majority of the unit. BLM 6310 directs that "Human impacts outside the area will not normally be considered in assessing naturalness of an area".³

The only impact remaining within the actual unit boundary is a metal water tank at photopoint 018. The tank is of small stature relative to the surrounding topography and vegetation. It is isolated, accessed via a faint, primitive Way, and is difficult to see from a short distance away. It is substantially unnoticeable and minimally impacts the naturalness of the area. Similarly, there are several informal primitive routes (see 003, 011, 013, 014, 017, 026, and 028) which do not meet the definition of Wilderness Inventory Roads⁴. These routes and the rationale for classifying them as Ways (here synonymous with "Primitive Routes"), are documented individually in Section 3: Description of the

3 BLM 6310, Pg. 6

4 For definition of Wilderness Inventory Road, see BLM 6310, Pg. 11

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Unit Boundary, Routes and Impacts. They are not being maintained by mechanical means, are abandoned or kept open only by the passage of vehicles, and minimally impact the naturalness of the unit.

Outstanding Opportunities for Solitude or Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

In the Stewart Canyon proposed LWC, rugged topography, dramatic scenic vistas, and a wild, remote character create outstanding opportunities for both solitude *and* primitive and unconfined recreation.

Solitude

The defining geographic characteristic of the Stewart Canyon area is simply the vast scale of the landscape. The Peloncillo Mountains are a massive range, spanning many miles to the North and South. East and West of these mountains are broad, undulating, desert plains, and beyond, more mountains, in every direction. A visitor to the proposed LWC is dwarfed by the humbling scale of the Peloncillos and the miles of unbroken vistas. The unit is a within a much larger block of mostly undeveloped state and federal land, 10 miles or more in most places from the nearest paved road (U.S. Hwy 70).

The Peloncillos are an old, heavily eroded volcanic range, of rounded buttes and broad, deep valleys. Dozens of these valleys penetrate the eastern flanks of the mountains, each one providing an outstanding opportunity for solitude. Hiking up one of these drainages, a visitor is totally ensconced in wilderness, surrounded only by towering ridges, juniper trees, and wildlife. The interior of these mountains are totally insulated from the sights, sounds, and signs of civilization. On the plains below, gently rolling topography and vegetation such as creosote and yucca provide some screening. Numerous sandy washes, thick with mesquite, provide additional cover. But a visitor to these lowlands will feel alone simply because of the scale and isolation of the area. Lines of sight are unimpeded for dozens of miles, yet no signs of civilization are visible on the horizon. Few visitors come this way, so the chances of seeing or hearing other people or cars are low.

Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

The Stewart Canyon proposed LWC offers outstanding opportunities for hiking, hunting, horseback riding, rockhounding, photography, and wildlife viewing. The ridges and peaks of the Peloncillo Mountains are tempting targets for hikers or riders. The wide-open scrubland invites exploration; there are no trails here except in the imagination of the visitor. The topography is somewhat gentle, belying its grand scale, so large ridge and valley systems can be wandered with relative ease. The 5,000-6,000 foot summits of the Peloncillos still provide a challenging hike, with staggering views of the surrounding countryside. The Whitlock Valley and Whitlock Mountains can be viewed immediately to the west, with Mt Graham further in the distance. To the south, there are the seemingly endless peaks of the Dos Cabezas and Chiricahuas. Desert, mountains, and sky meet at distant horizons, creating gorgeous cloudscapes and sunsets.

In the shelter of valleys and washes, wildlife abounds. Javelina, quail, rabbit, and coyote are particularly common here, and other game species such as mule deer and pronghorn antelope are known to occur in the area. The portion of the unit occupied by the Peloncillo Mountains was given the highest rating by the Arizona Game and Fish Species of Recreational and Economic Importance (SERI)⁵ model, indicating its potential for outstanding hunting.

⁵ SERI data from the AZGF Habimap tool at <http://www.habimap.org/habimap/>

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Rockhounding is a uniquely attractive activity here. The volcanic conditions that created the Peloncillo Mountains also created an unusual abundance of agates, geodes, and other semi-precious stones. While the nearby Round Mountain Rockhound Area is well known as a world class destination for fire agate, similar deposits can be found throughout the Peloncillos and on the plains below. Several rewarding days could be spent wandering the lava-rock plains of the Stewart Canyon unit, while spending a night camped on the same flats would provide astonishing stargazing. Light pollution here is virtually non-existent.⁶

Supplemental values:

The proposed LWC has exceptional value for the conservation of biodiversity

According to the Species and Habitat Conservation Guide model (SHCG)⁷, the portion of the unit occupied by the Peloncillo Mountains is given the highest possible rating for conservation potential. The Peloncillos span a large latitudinal gradient and provide a habitat corridor for the movement of mountain species of concern such as Bighorn Sheep throughout southeastern Arizona. This area is also transitional between Sonoran and Chihuahan desert plant communities, allowing for the coexistence of unusual species assemblages and generally high biodiversity.

⁶ Light pollution data from <http://darksitefinder.com/maps/world.html>

⁷ SHCG data from the AZGF Habimap tool at <http://www.habimap.org/habimap/>

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Scenic Photos

The following photos document the naturalness, wilderness characteristics, and potential for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation present in the Stewart Canyon proposed LWC. Photo locations are detailed in the summary map above. All photos taken by the author during the field survey, 2/2-2/3.



Scenic Photo 1 – Yucca forest amidst grasslands in the southern portion of the unit. Iconic vegetation enhances the naturalness of the unit and provides solitude by screening. The Peloncillo Mountains are in the background.



Scenic Photo 2 – The vastness of scale here imparts a feeling of remoteness and solitude. The 5000-6000 ft peaks of the Peloncillos tower over gently rolling plains, in an endless expanse of desert.

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Scenic Photo 3 – Rugged volcanic terrain in the foothills of the Peloncillos challenges hikers. This area is rich in fire agates and other semi-precious stones, drawing rockhounds.



Scenic Photo 4 – A broad, deep, valley between two ridges in the Peloncillo Mountains, providing topographic screening and terrific hiking, horseback riding, and scenic vistas. There are dozens of valleys like this in the unit, most with few to no human impacts whatsoever.

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Scenic Photo 5 – View across grasslands into a lonely valley in the northern portion of the unit. This valley narrows into Stewart Canyon, for which the unit is named. Visitors here will experience outstanding solitude, dwarfed by the scale of the landscape and silence of the desert.



Scenic Photo 6 – A sandy wash, sheltered by the ridge to the south, is wooded with mesquite and juniper, providing habitat for birds and wildlife. Numerous quail, jays, flickers, rabbit, and javelina were observed in this area.

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Scenic Photo 7 – The crest of the Peloncillos, viewed from the Whitlock Valley to the west. Many of these peaks are within the proposed LWC unit, providing challenging targets for hikers and staggering vistas over the surrounding landscape.



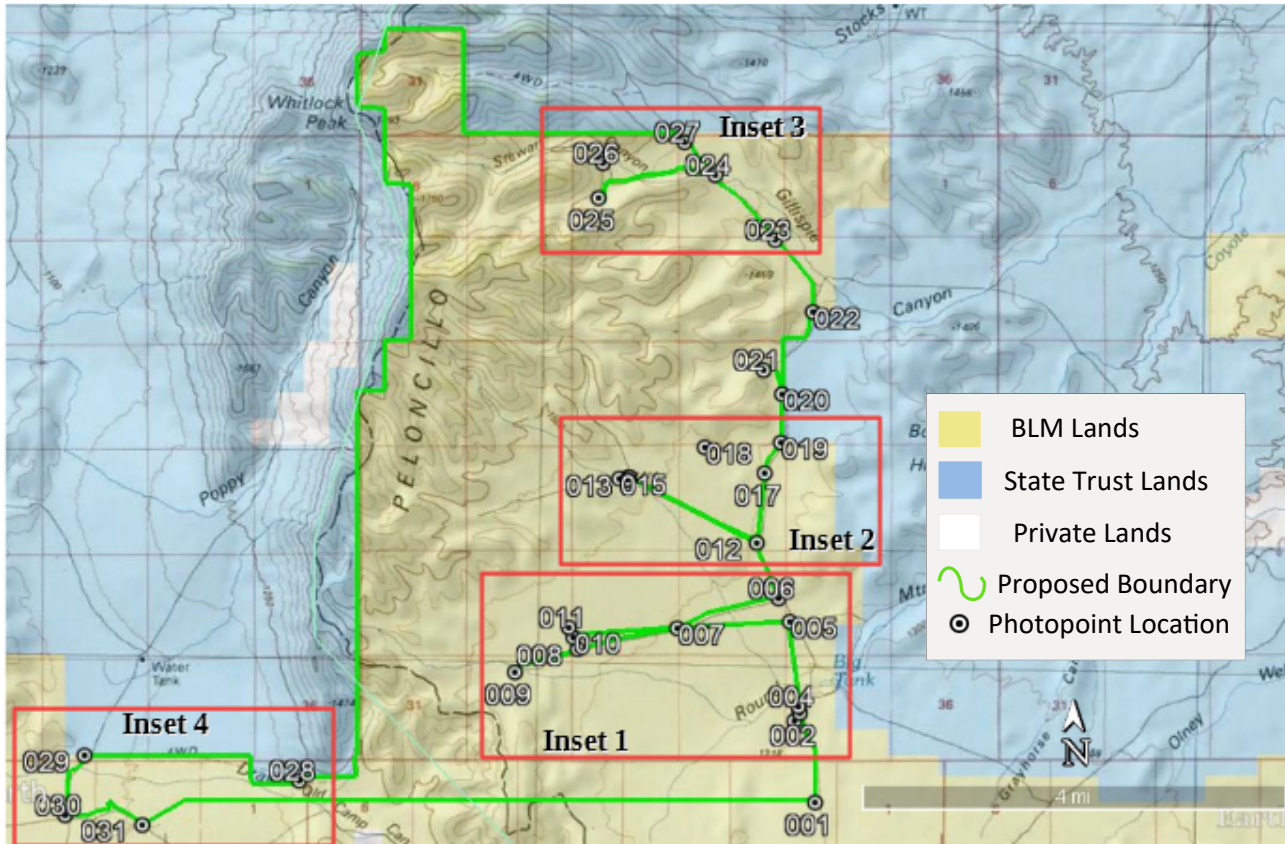
Scenic Photo 8 – A wash in the southwestern corner of the unit. Dense mesquite thickets provide solitude via vegetative screening and habitat for the abundant rabbit and quail found here.

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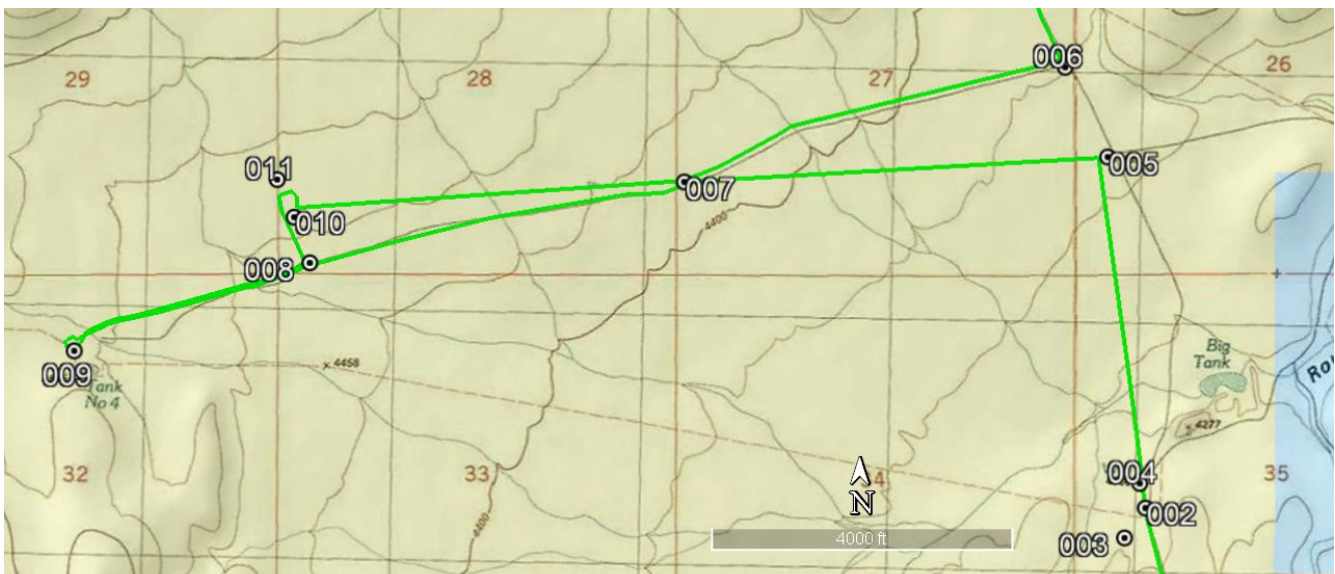


Scenic Photo 9 – Rocky volcanic terrain and desert scrublands of ccotillo, creosote, prickly pear, and grasses. The Peloncillo Mountains loom in the background, a constant presence throughout the unit.

Section 3: Description of the Unit Boundary, Routes, and Impacts
Reference and Inset Maps

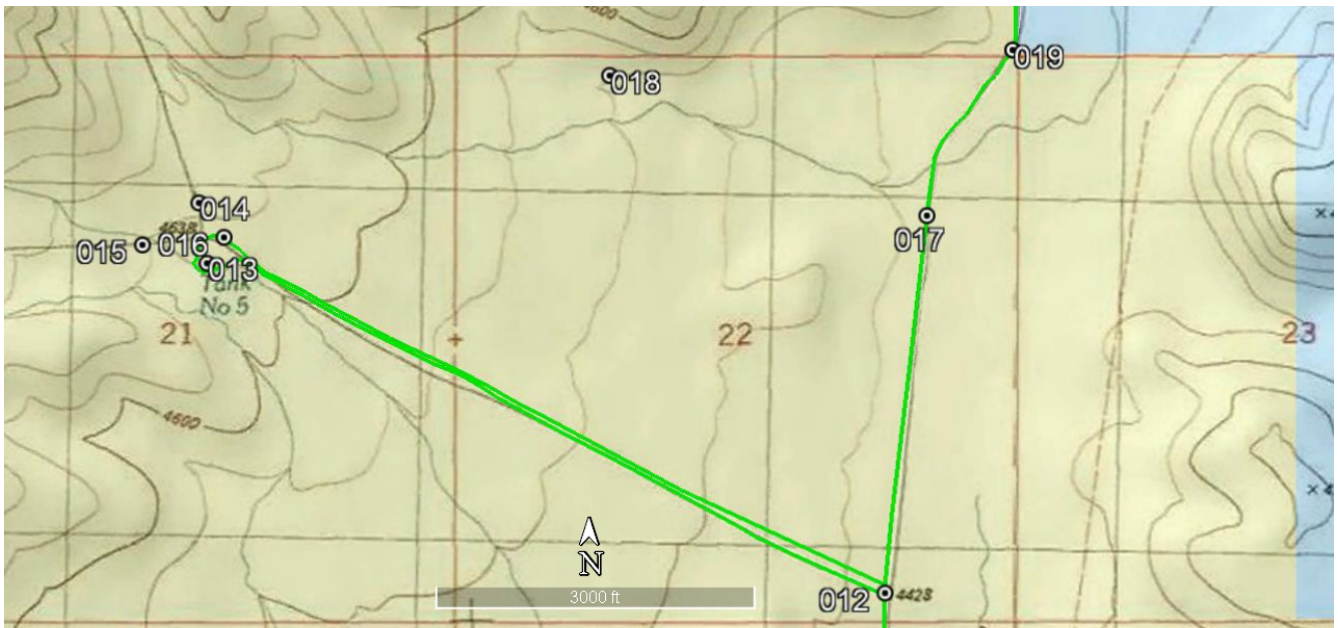


Stewart Canyon Reference Map – Showing inset maps and photopoints along the unit boundary.



Inset 1 - Photopoints 002-011 along the eastern unit boundary, showing a major cherrystem to a radio tower (010) and dirt tank (009).

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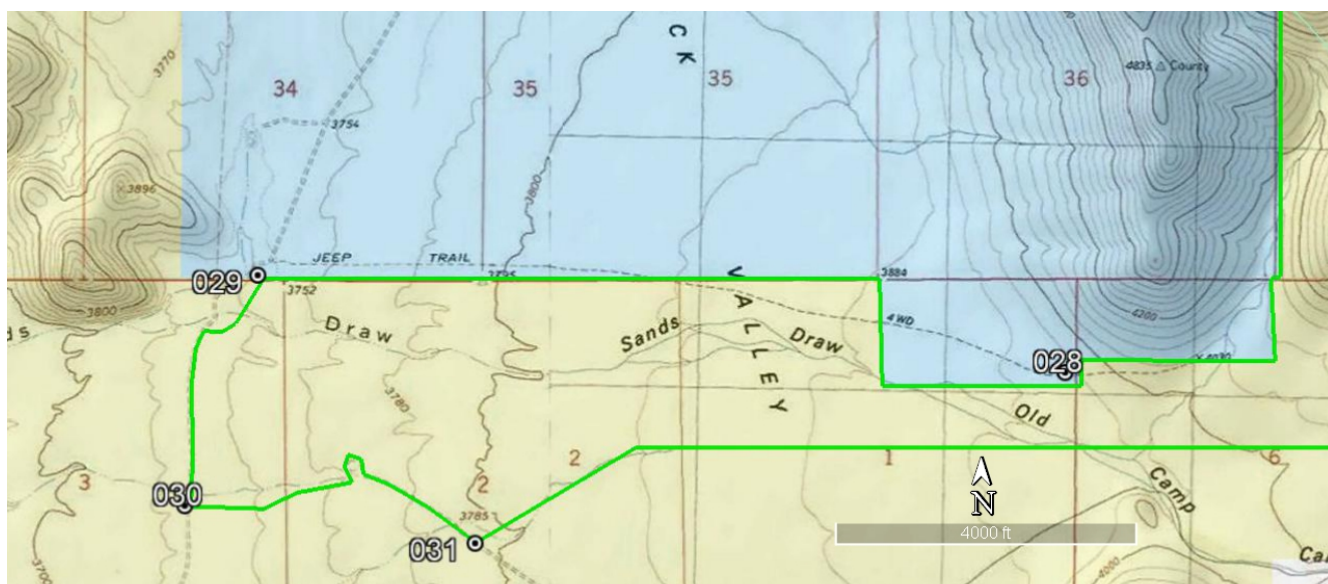


Inset 2 - Photopoints 012-019 along the eastern unit boundary, showing a major cherrystem to a dirt tank (012), and a Way (017) to a metal water tank (018).



Inset 3 - Photopoints 023-027, in the northeastern portion of the unit. 024 is the beginning of a cherrystem to a dirt tank (025). The northern unit boundary is formed by the BLM/State Trust land boundary.

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Inset 4 - Photopoints 028-031, in the southwestern corner of the unit. 029 is the intersection of the boundary road with the State Trust land boundary. East from 031, the boundary is formed by the future SunZia Transmission Project corridor.

Narrative Description of Proposed LWC Boundary, Vehicle Routes, and Human Impacts

The southern unit boundary is formed mostly by the proposed SunZia Southwest Transmission Project corridor⁸. The eastern boundary is a combination of State/BLM land boundaries and wilderness inventory roads, primarily used to access the Lazy B Ranch infrastructure. The northern and western boundaries are almost entirely composed of the State/BLM property boundary. This description begins in the southeast corner at point **001**, proceeding counterclockwise:

- At **001**, an unnamed road intersects the SunZia corridor, and forms the unit boundary to the north.
- **002** is a route junction, with the unit boundary road continuing to the northwest. An unmaintained, overgrown Way heads southwest into the unit. See **003** for typical conditional of this route.
- From **004** northward, the unit boundary follows power transmission lines.
- **005** is a junction of power lines, with the unit boundary following the power lines west, in a cherrystem formed by the power lines and their access road, which begins just to the north at point **006**. The powerlines and access road cross at **007**.
- **008** is a junction, with a cherrystem road continuing west to a used and maintained dirt tank at **009**. The road to the north leads a short distance to a communications tower at **010**. Beyond the tower, the route becomes a faint, unmaintained Way (**011**), minimally impacting naturalness.
- The unit boundary road continues from **006** north to a junction with a cherrystem road at **012**. The cherrystem ends at **013**, a used and maintained dirt tank. Beyond the tank, there are a pair

⁸ http://www.sunzia.net/resources_maps.php

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of faint, unmaintained Ways at **014** and **015**. **014** shows signs of use only by cattle, and neither route appears constructed or maintained by mechanical means. Both routes are blocked by a gravel berm closure point at **016**.

- **017** is a faint, unmaintained Way heading west to a single, inconspicuous water tank at **018**. While this tank is in use, it is minimally visible from a short distance away, blending in with the landscape and minimally affecting naturalness.
- At **019**, the boundary road crosses into State land, and the BLM/State land boundary becomes the unit boundary northward.
- **020** is a junction with a short cherrystem road, heading northwest to a used and maintained dirt tank at **021**.
- At **022**, the unit boundary again becomes a wilderness inventory road.
- **023** is a faint, unmaintained Way heading southwest into the unit, serving no apparent purpose and kept open solely by the passage of vehicles.
- **024** is a junction with a cherrystem road, heading west to a dirt tank at **025**. There is also a faint Way at **026**, heading north from the dirt tank, disappearing after a short distance. This route is overgrown and shows no evidence of mechanical construction, recent use, or maintenance.
- At **027**, the boundary road intersects the state land boundary, which forms the northern unit boundary to the west.
- The BLM/State Trust land property boundary forms the entire northern and western portions of the proposed LWC boundary. There is only one discernible human impact along these segments of the unit boundary, a short, rough, overgrown way at **028**.
- At **029**, the unit boundary becomes a wilderness inventory road, heading south to point **030**, a junction with another road to the east. This road intersects the SunZia project corridor at **031**. This future transmission line corridor forms the southern boundary of the unit.

This concludes the boundary description