

8011

**MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR**

**WASSEN CREEK**

**AREA OF CRITICAL ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN**

**(ACEC)**

U. S. Department of Interior  
Bureau of Land Management

**UMPQUA FIELD OFFICE**  
**COOS BAY DISTRICT - OREGON**

Approved by:

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Date

## INTRODUCTION

This document provides management guidance for the Wassen Creek Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs) in the Umpqua Field Office. All prescribed management actions are in compliance with the *Final Coos Bay District Resource Management Plan* (USDI, 1994a) and its *Record of Decision* (USDI, 1995), and the *Record of Decision for Amendments to Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management Planning Documents Within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl*, and its' *Standards and Guidelines for Management of Habitat for Late-Successional and Old-Growth Forest Related Species Within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl* (USDA; USDI, 1994b), and the *Record of Decision and Standards and Guidelines for the Amendment to the Survey and Manage, Protection Buffer, and other Mitigation Measures Standards and Guidelines* (USDA; USDI, 2001). This plan conforms with: the Aquatic Conservation Strategy (ACS) objectives described in the Standards and Guidelines (S&Gs, pp. B-9 through B-34) of the Northwest Forest Plan; the *Port-Orford-cedar Management Guidelines* (USDI, Oct.1994c; and the *Noxious Weed Strategy for Oregon & Washington* (USDI, 1994d) and *Partners Against Weeds*, An Action Plan for the Bureau of Land Management (USDI, 1996).

The Wassen Creek is located in Late Successional Reserve (LSR) land use allocation and has some portion of its' acreage included in Riparian Reserves (RR). Also, it is reinstated Oregon & California (O&C) railroad land and in a Tier 1 Key Watershed. Descriptions of these designations are listed below.

**Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC)** - (designated in 1983 by citing Federal Land Policy & Management Act, 1976): "Areas within public lands where special management attention is required (when such areas are developed or used, or where no development is required) to protect and prevent irreparable damage to important historic, cultural, or scenic values, fish and wildlife resources, or other natural systems or processes . . ." (43 CFR 1601.0-5). To be designated an ACEC the value, resource, system, or process identified must be of "substantial significance ... this generally requires qualities of more than local significance and special worth, consequence, meaning, distinctiveness, or cause for concern" (43 CFR 1610.7-2).

**Research Natural Area (RNA):** The RNA designation itself is not tied to a particular law and each agency uses different laws and regulations to govern its use. BLM regulations state that for an area to be designated a RNA it must have one or more of the following characteristics:

- A typical representation of a common plant or animal association.
- An unusual plant or animal association.
- A threatened or endangered plant or animal species.
- A typical representation of common geologic, soil, or water features.
- Outstanding or unusual geologic, soil, or water features.

RNA designation is designed to prevent unnatural encroachments and activities which would directly or indirectly modify ecological processes (i.e. to preserve an area in an undisturbed state) with research

and education as the exclusive focus. Activities such as logging (including salvage) and grazing are strictly prohibited, unless it is a treatment of the natural features of interest. Physical improvements such as roads, trails, fences, and building are generally not allowed except those considered essential to proper research or educational use. Public use is generally discouraged. Maintaining trails in existence at the time of the RNA designation, depends on administrative units and determination of effects.

Reasons for RNA designation are:

- Provide baseline to compare results of human activities in similar environment.
- Provide opportunities to study natural processes in undisturbed ecosystems, including plant and animal species (particularly rare and endangered species).
- Provide a gene pool preserve for plant and animal species (particularly rare and endangered species).

**Late-Successional Reserve (LSR)** - (designated in 1994 by the Northwest Forest Plan): LSR's "are to be managed to protect and enhance conditions of late-successional and old-growth forest ecosystems, which serve as habitat for late-successional and old-growth related species including the northern spotted owl. These reserves are designed to maintain a functional, interacting, late-successional and old-growth forest ecosystem" (ROD Standards and Guidelines, C-1 #1)

**Riparian Reserves (RR)**- (designated in 1994 by the Northwest Forest Plan): Riparian Reserves were developed to restore and maintain the ecological health of watersheds and aquatic ecosystems contained within them (Standards and Guides, C-30). A component of the riparian reserves is the Aquatic Conservation Strategy (Standards and Guides, B-9). As a general rule, standards and guides for Riparian Reserves prohibit or regulate activities in Riparian Reserves that retard or prevent attainment of the Aquatic Conservation Strategy objectives.

**Oregon and California Lands (O&C)**: The 1866 congressional act granting Public lands to the Oregon and California Railroad Company was revoked in 1916. These revested lands were placed under the General Land Office (GLO) with guidelines to dispose of them. The revenues from the sale of the timber and lands were to be divided among the federal government, Oregon, and the counties in which the lands were located. The results were disappointing so the Oregon and California Revested Lands Sustained Yield Management Act of August 28, 1937 was passed. This act called for implementation of a sustained yield cutting program. Lands could be used for grazing and recreation, but watersheds, wildlife, and other resources were to be protected. Receipts from sale of timber were still to be shared with the counties having O&C lands.

**Key Watershed**: Serve as refugia critical for maintaining and recovering habitat for at-risk stocks of anadromous salmonids and resident fish species. These refugia include areas of high quality habitat and areas of degraded habitat. Those with high quality conditions will serve as anchors for the potential recovery of depressed stocks. Those of lower quality habitat have high potential for restoration and will become future sources of high quality habitat with the implementation of a comprehensive restoration program.

**Tier 1 Watershed:** Tier 1 watersheds contribute directly to conservation of at-risk anadromous salmonids, and resident fish species. They also have a high potential of being restored as part of a watershed restoration program.

**ACEC - QUICK REFERENCE TABLE**

<b>WASSEN CREEK - 3,440 ACRES - T21S, R09W, Sec. 7, 8, 17, 18, and T21S, R10W, Sec. 12, &amp; 13</b>	
Land Classifications & Uses	ACEC, LSR, RR, O&C, and Tier 1 - Key Watershed
OHV status	Limited-“designated roads only”
Leasable Mineral Entry Status	Open - (no surface occupancy)
Locatable-Salable Mineral Entry Status	Closed
Oregon Natural Heritage Ecosystem Cells (ONHP 1998)	Coast Range Ecoregion, Palustrine Wetlands #93. Pond at mid to high elevation, including slump ponds
Designated Values	<p><b>ACEC/LSR/RR/Tier 1-Key Watershed</b> -Preserve, protect, or restore native species composition and ecological processes of biological communities.</p> <p><b>Special Status Species</b> - Critical Habitat for Northern Spotted Owls &amp; Marbled Murrelets, &amp; for T&amp;E and special status plants.</p> <p><b>Natural System /Fish/Wildlife/Botanical</b> - Good example of a coastal mid-aged Douglas-fir forest and has resident cutthroat trout.</p>

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## **WASSEN CREEK AREA OF CRITICAL ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN**

**Access:** Go north on Highway 101 from Coos Bay to Reedsport 27 miles. Go east on Highway 38 about 19.5 miles (just a mile or two past Scottsburg) and turn left (i.e. north) onto Wells Creek road # 22-9-7.0 at the Wells Creek Guard station, just before the Wells Creek fire station and store. This is road # 21-9-32.0 and then becomes Wassen Lake road # 21-9-10.0. The Eastern boundary of the ACEC is this main Wassen Lake Road #21-09-10.0, and the northern boundary is road # 21-10-12.1. Steampot road # 21-9-30.0 accesses the southwestern boundary. There are a few roads that access the interior. See attached map(s).

**Acres:** Approximately 3,440 acres.

**Elevation:** Approximately 550 feet to 1,680 feet, see attached map.

**Land Use Allocation:** Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC), Late Successional Reserve (LSR), and Riparian Reserves (RR). O&C lands in a Tier 1 Key Watershed.

**Legal Description:** Sec. 7,8,17 and 18 & T21S, R10W, Sec. 12 and 13, T21S, R09W, Willamette Meridian.

**Background:** Wassen Creek is a tributary to the Smith River and mostly flows through one of the largest uncut blocks of forest in the Oregon Coast Range. The drainage could potentially be used as a control to study water quality. The steep drainage is very dissected, and is in the Tyee Soil formation which is known for unstable soils. Most of the stands probably regenerated following the fires of the 1850s. While the creek and surrounding riparian zones are usually listed as the key element of concern for this area, the forested uplands have also played a critical role in the development of the watershed. The forest characteristics are deemed relatively unique as they are characteristic of more dry site conditions, as the presence of rhododendron shows. Also the shallow soils play a role in the mix of understory plant communities. Recommendations were that boundaries be based on watershed lines rather than legal or political boundaries.

In 1979 Wassen Creek Drainage was proposed for inclusion in the Wild and Scenic River system. The primary reason for this consideration was because it was adjacent to the proposed Forest Service Rare II roadless area # 6157. The USFS decided not to recommend area # 6157 for wilderness; one reason was lack of public interest. Therefore in and of itself our area did not meet wilderness criteria primarily because of:

- Land Classification/Size: At that time the various land classifications and acres were: TPCC withdrawn 2,175ac., habitat diversity 45ac., unsold O&C timber base 1,436ac., and 37ac. of plantation forest in the proposed area for about 3,700acers. There was also consideration of a larger area of about 5,180 acres. Again only about 2,175 acres were TPCC withdrawn and the rest in commercial O&C lands. The minimum wilderness size was 5,000 acres and commercial O&C lands could not be considered.
- Roads: The 2,175 acre TPCC withdrawal met the roadless requirements. The 3,700 acre areas boundary ran along major road systems and included some spurs. The larger area of 5,180 acres included more roads and harvested timber.

Sarah Green of the Pacific Northwest Research Station and Research Natural Area committee provided the following comments in 1987:

- The headwaters of Wassen Creek are not on BLM land and had been completely clearcut, with numerous other clearcuts included within the boundaries.
- The road defining the north and east boundaries compromises the stream system.
- Wassen Lake contains numerous large Douglas-fir snags, indicating an older forest than is currently present. Inlets to the pond contain large amounts of fine sediment originating from the road system, and from clearcuts on private and BLM lands upstream. Human use of the pond is evident. There is a steep road into the pond, a fishing trail around the pond, and numerous unofficial campsites (fire rings and trash) which make the ability of this pond to serve as a monitoring site questionable.
- The area is best described as a mixed aged forest with some old growth characteristics. Old growth structural characteristics exist (large coarse wood debris, few snags, and multilayered canopy), but is patchy and located mostly in riparian areas. The 100-150 year old stands are the most valuable feature and are fairly extensive. Several plant associations exist in the area.

The USFS 1997 Smith River watershed analysis discussed this area. It is in a key watershed, and is considered an undeveloped area with recreation potentials. It is largely roadless and Wassen Creek is still proposed as a Wild and Scenic River. Management direction seeks to preserve the isolated scenic qualities. 3,944 acres are undeveloped recreation (USDA 1990) and were part of the original RARE II roadless area designation (7,546ac. of roadless and undeveloped rec), has low recreation use. Federal Lands Assessment, 1995 recommended the area have a semi-primitive non-motorized objective, found to be most consistent with recreation and wildlife objectives for the area.

This area was given ACEC designation under the Coos Bay District Resource Management Plan in May of 1995.

**History of Use:** Dense understory, downed timber, and precipitous slopes make cross-country travel difficult. Limited hunting, picnicking, fishing, and nature studies are available at Wassen Lake. There is a gravel pit reserved in lot 3, section 18, T. 21 S., R. 9 W., Willamette Meridian.

**Primary Values:** As a Tier 1 Key Watershed this ACEC contributes directly to conservation of at-risk anadromous salmonids, and resident fish species. It is considered to have high potential for restoration and become future sources of high quality habitat.

This ACEC is a large tract of dense mid-age (100+) Douglas-fir-hemlock timber in a relatively undisturbed condition with few interior roads and abutting the Siuslaw National Forest on the west side. Wassen Lake is a shallow 5 acre pond formed by a land slump on the edge of a Timber Production Classification Capability (TPCC) withdrawal area. Wassen Creek is a small perennial stream with steep boulder strewn cascades. The drainage could be used as a control, to study water quality. A pure strain of cutthroat trout (i.e. no hybridization by introduced populations) exists in this area as a result of a significant obstruction further down stream. Anadromous fish existed in the past on the lower reaches, but past logging practices on private lands has negatively affected fish habitat. It potentially provides for primitive recreational opportunities including hunting, fishing, camping, and hiking.

The area fills ONHP's Coast Range Ecoregion, Palustrine Wetlands #93. Pond at mid to high elevation, including slump ponds. Fills or partially fills Coast Range Ecoregion, western hemlock Zone Cells # 16, and 21; western hemlock/rhododendron/swordfern, and western hemlock/evergreen huckleberry.

There is potential habitat for Survey and Manage species. There is a documented location of *Usnea longissima*, which is a category F species.

**Management Objectives:** (RMP pg 38)

- Retain existing RNAs and ACECs that meet the test for continued designation. Provide new special areas where needed to maintain or protect important values.
- Maintain, protect, and/or restore relevant and important values.
- Manage uses to prevent damage to the values that make the area outstanding.

## **Management and Use Constraints:**

- A. Aquatics (including candidate and T&E species): Anadromous fish are limited by the Devils Stairway waterfalls located downstream from the ACEC. However, resident cutthroat trout are plentiful above these falls and within the ACEC. Fish enhancement projects may be conducted within this area.

Based on data from Johnson and O'Neil (2001) and the Coos Bay District Resource Management Plan (USDI, 1995) 16 riparian-associated amphibian species, including 7 Special Status Species, may occur with the Wassen Creek ACEC. Comprehensive surveys have not been conducted but the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife has documented the presence of Red-legged frogs in their aquatic habitat surveys. Other riparian species that may occur, providing that necessary habitat elements are present, include 132 species of birds, 54 species of mammals, and 13 species of reptiles.

- B. Botany (including S&M and T&E species): Due to existing potential habitat for Survey and manage species and special status species, pre-disturbance surveys would be required (FSEIS, 2000) prior to any habitat disturbing activities. Botanical surveys have been conducted in selected areas of the ACEC in relation to establishment of a biking/hiking trail. There is a documented location of *Usnea longissima*, which is a category F species.
- C. Cooperative Management opportunities: Adjacent land owners will be provided a copy of the management plan and encouraged to provide additional protection. Coordinated management of this area with USFS would benefit many resources.
- D. Cultural Resources: There are no documented cultural resource values in this ACEC. Any proposed ground disturbing activity within this area would go through standard NEPA processes, including cultural resource review and consultation with the appropriate Federally - recognized Native American tribes.
- E. Fire Management:
1. Fire Suppression: Is to be done according to the current District Fire Management Plan.
  2. Fire Use: Is to be done according to the current District Fire Management Plan.
  3. Fuels Treatment: Is to be done according to the current District Fire Management Plan.
- F. Insects and Disease: No additional control, beyond normal BLM practices, for insects or

diseases will be carried out unless infestation or infection threatens to drastically alter the natural ecological processes within the area.

- G. Land Exchange/Sale/Acquisition: Standard NEPA processes include BLM specialists review, and requires compliance with all appropriate plans including land classification restrictions.
- H. Land Right-of-Ways/Access: If no other reasonable alternative exists, BLM can not legally prohibit the public from accessing or managing their lands.
- I. Minerals: The area is open for mineral leasing with no surface occupancy and closed to locatable/salable mineral.
- J. Non-Native Plants and Animals: (including noxious weeds) - Introduction of non-native plants and animals is prohibited. Prioritize these areas to eliminate noxious weeds and non-native plants and animals.
- K. Other land Uses: Land uses not identified in this plan will be permitted only if they are compatible with the management objectives of the ACEC and Coos Bay District Record of Decision and Resource Management Plan (USDI, 1995). All land use proposals will be reviewed by BLM personnel with the appropriate expertise.
- L. Publicity: The location and resources of the ACEC will be publicized in public, official and scientific circles.
- M. Recreation (including visitor use and interpretation): - Recreational activities will go through standard NEPA process and be in conformance with the RMP and this management plan.
- N. Research and Education: Observational activities are favored by BLM. Techniques will normally be of a nondestructive, non-consumptive nature. An exception to this will be the collection of voucher specimens, unless such collection might significantly reduce species population levels. Collecting will be carried out in accordance with Federal (50 CFR 17) and State (ORS 564) regulations concerning the collection of survey and manage, rare, threatened, or endangered species, and the specimens will be deposited in a public educational or scientific institution. No person shall use, occupy, construct, or maintain facilities in a manner inconsistent with the purpose of the area. Felling of trees, extensive soil excavation, and modification of any part of the forest and/or its related ecosystems for manipulative research studies is not permitted.
- O. Silviculture: Silviculture practices will be considered as a tool to maintain, protect, or restore relevant and important ecological system processes of the biological communities, or in cases of catastrophic damage when the damage threatens adjacent forests or public safety (see fire, and

insects and disease). All actions will comply with management directions described in the Coos Bay Resource Management Plan (USDI, 1995).

- P. Special Forest Products: Standards and Guidelines for LSR's and Riparian Reserves would apply. No additional restrictions are needed to protect the ACEC.
- Q. Timber Management: This area is not available for planned timber harvest activities, or road construction. Windthrow and other damaged timber will be allowed to decay as a natural part of the ecosystem process. Exceptions may be made to maintain, protect, or restore relevant and important ecological system processes of the biological communities, or in cases of catastrophic damage when the damage threatens adjacent forests or public safety (see fire, and insects and disease). Exceptions will comply with management directions as described in the Coos Bay Resource Management Plan (USDI, 1995).
- R. Vehicle Use: Motorized and non-motorized vehicle are limited to designated roads and trails, except that required for emergencies or specifically authorized by BLM. Subject to valid existing rights and buried lines in rights-of-way of existing roads. Exclude rights-of-way in this area (see fire and timber management). Allocation of lands to existing rights-of-way would continue. Future rights-of-way may be granted in this area when no feasible alternative route or designated right-of-way corridor is available.
- S. Visual Resource Management: The ACEC and surrounding lands are classified as VRM 4, which allows moderate levels of change to the characteristic landscape. Management activities may dominate the view and be the major focus of viewer attention. Every attempt should be made to minimize the effect of management activities through careful location, minimal disturbance, and repeating the basic elements of form, line, color, and texture. However, other land status and classifications, such as ACEC and LSR, severely restrict the type of management activities that may occur. Under these situations, whichever rules are the most restrictive take precedence.
- T. Wildlife Habitat: (including S&M and T&E species) -

**Habitat enhancement projects:** Enhancement projects may be conducted provided they maintain, protect, restore relevant and important values, or preserve, protect, or restore native species composition and ecological processes of biological communities (including Oregon Natural Heritage Plan terrestrial and aquatic cells) and they comply with the appropriate regulations and plans as described below. With the exception of federally protected species, when the effects of proposed activities may conflict among species with varying habitat requirements, the needs of riparian associated species have priority.

**Special Status Species (SSS) Occurrence:** The Coos Bay District Record of Decision and

Resource Management Plan ([RMP]; May 1995) provides a list of SSS that may occur in the Coos Bay District. Northern pygmy owls, bald eagles, and red-legged frogs have been documented in the area, and other SSS undoubtedly occur as well. The area is classified as unsurveyed suitable habitat for marbled murrelets, contains four northern spotted owl site centers, and is designated as critical habitat for murrelets and spotted owls. Proposed activities would require review by a wildlife biologist and may require compliance/consultation procedures with the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

**Northwest Forest Plan Survey and Manage Species (red tree voles):** No red tree vole surveys have been conducted in this area. Activities would comply with the ROD for Amendment to the Survey and Manage, Protection Buffer, and Other Mitigation Measures Standards and Guidelines (USDA; USDI, 2001).

**Coos Bay District Resource Management Plan buffer species:** The Coos Bay District Record of Decision and Resource Management Plan (USDI, 1995) requires protective buffers around the nests of selected species, including great blue herons and certain raptors. No nests of listed species have been documented to date within this ACEC.

**Game Species:** Hunting and trapping within the ACEC is acceptable and is regulated by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. Common game species include Roosevelt elk, black bear, black-tailed deer, and ruffed grouse.

### **Implementation Monitoring:** (Appendix L - ROD)

#### **Monitoring Questions:**

1. Are BLM actions and BLM-authorized actions/uses near or within the special area consistent with resource management plan objectives and management direction?
2. What is the status of the preparation, revision and implementation of this area of critical environmental concern management plan?
3. Are existing BLM actions and BLM-authorized actions and uses not consistent with management direction for the area being eliminated or relocated?
4. Are actions being identified which are needed to maintain or restore the important values of the area? Are the actions being implemented?
5. Are protection buffers being provided for specific rare and locally endemic species and other species in the upland forest matrix?

Monitoring Requirements:

1. Annually, at least 20% of the files on all actions and research proposals within and adjacent to the special area will be reviewed to determine whether the possibility of impacts on ACEC values was considered, and whether any mitigation identified as important for maintenance of ACEC values was required. If mitigation was required, the relevant actions will be reviewed on the ground, after completion, to ascertain whether they were actually implemented.
2. The annual Program Summary will address implementation questions 2 through 5.

**Effectiveness and Validation Monitoring:** (Appendix L - ROD)

Monitoring Questions:

1. Are the implemented management actions designed to protect the values of the special area effective?
2. Are the special area managed to restore or prevent the loss of outstanding values and minimize disturbance?

Monitoring Requirements:

1. The special area will be monitored at least every three years to determine if the values for which it was designated are being maintained.
2. When proactive management actions are implemented they will be monitored annually for the first three years and after that every three years, or until objectives are met, to determine if these actions met their objectives.

## REFERENCES

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