

Draft Evaluation Criteria for the Tonto National Forest Wilderness Recommendation Process

Introduction

When revising the Forest Plan, the Tonto National Forest is required to identify and evaluate lands that may or may not be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS) and determine whether to recommend to Congress any such lands for wilderness. A description of this process can be found in [Chapter 70 of the Forest Service Land Management Planning Handbook 1909.12](#). This process includes the following four steps:

1. **Inventory:** Identify and inventory all lands that may or may not be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System using a given set of criteria.
2. **Evaluation:** Evaluate the wilderness characteristics of each inventoried area using a given set of criteria and assign a ranking of high, moderate, low, or no for its wilderness character.
3. **Analysis:** The forest supervisor will determine which areas to further analyze in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process.
4. **Recommendation:** The Forest Supervisor will decide which areas, if any, to recommend to Congress 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.

More information on wilderness areas and the wilderness recommendation process can be found on the plan revision website www.tontoplan.org.

Step 1: Inventory

The primary function of the inventory step is to identify all lands on the Tonto National Forest that will be evaluated for wilderness characteristics as defined in the [Wilderness Act of 1964](#). The inventory is intended to be broad and inclusive. Chapter 70, Sections 71.21 thru 71.22b, of the Forest Service Land Management Planning Handbook 1909.12 outlines criteria for what should and should not be included in the inventoried areas. There are two broad categories of criteria: 1) size and 2) improvements.

The draft inventory criteria identified in the Forest Service Handbook (FSH 1909.12 Chapter 70, Section 71.2; 71.21 thru 71.22b) and further defined by the interdisciplinary team and public engagement can be found [here](#).

Step 2: Evaluation

The primary function of the evaluation step is to identify all lands in the inventory for wilderness characteristics. All lands included from the inventory must be evaluated for their wilderness characteristics.

The evaluation is based on the criteria identified in the *Forest Service Handbook (FSH 1909.12 Chapter 70, Section 72.1)* and further defined by the Tonto National Forest through resource specialist and public engagement. This document outlines draft criteria definitions that the Tonto National Forest planning team developed through internal engagement and public participation.

The evaluation step of the process has a given set of criteria which are explained and identified below in the following sections. These criteria will be used for ranking areas either high, moderate, low, or no for the level of wilderness characteristic the area has. This criteria, along with a guide detailing the ranking system, will be collaboratively reviewed and finalized after completing the inventory step.

Evaluation Criteria

Chapter 70, Section 72.1, of the Forest Service Land Management Planning Handbook 1909.12 outlines criteria for evaluation of lands for wilderness characteristics. In this step we will be evaluating the areas from the inventory for their apparent naturalness, outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation, size, unique and outstanding qualities, and manageability. These criteria, and draft definitions further defined by the Tonto National Forest and our publics, are outlined in the following sections.

Criterion 1: Apparent Naturalness

This criterion evaluates the degree to which an area generally appears to be affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprints of man's work substantially unnoticeable.

Table 1. Apparent Naturalness Criteria

Evaluation Criteria Identified in Planning Handbook	Evaluation Criteria Further Defined by Tonto National Forest
<u>Question 1a.</u> What is the composition of plant and animal communities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the vegetation types, associations, and plant and animal communities. • Do the plant and animal communities appear substantially unnatural? • How are concentrations of nonnative plants and/or animals distributed across the landscape? • Include any additional information related to the question.
<u>Question 1b.</u> What is the extent to which the area appears to reflect ecological conditions that would normally be associated with the area without human intervention?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would the average forest visitor perceive the naturalness of the area? • Describe the distribution and intensity of vegetation restoration treatments (e.g. thinning), timber harvest areas, and associated activities (e.g., clear cuts, bulldozer lines, fuel breaks). • Does the ecosystem appear natural (consider elements, including but not limited to vegetation, wildlife, soil, air, etc.)? • Consider places where human intervention has improved the apparent naturalness. • Include any additional information related to the question.

Evaluation Criteria Identified in Planning Handbook	Evaluation Criteria Further Defined by Tonto National Forest
<p><u>Question 1c.</u> What is the extent to which improvements included in the area represent a departure from apparent naturalness?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider the extent to which the following improvements cause the appearance to depart from apparent naturalness in the area as a whole. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Any remaining roads (including decommissioned, temporary, or user-created), system trails, and known unauthorized routes ○ Airstrips and heliports ○ Permanently installed vertical structures ○ Areas of mining activity ○ Range or wildlife improvements. ○ Recreation improvements. ○ Ground-return telephone lines, electric lines, and powerlines ○ Watershed treatment areas. ○ Structures, dwellings, and other relics of past occupation. • Consider the building materials and permanence of the improvements on the landscape. • Consider if the improvements are similar in type and appearance to improvements that exist in current Tonto National Forest Wilderness. • Include any additional information related to the question.

Criterion 2: Outstanding Opportunities for Solitude or a Primitive and Unconfined Type of Recreation

This criterion evaluates the degree to which the area has outstanding opportunities for solitude or for a primitive and unconfined type of recreation. 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. The definitions for this criterion are identified in the table below.

Table 2. Outstanding Opportunities for Solitude or a Primitive and Unconfined Type of Recreation Criteria

Evaluation Criteria Identified in Planning Directives	Evaluation Criteria Further Defined by Tonto National Forest
<p><u>Question 2a.</u> Consider impacts that are pervasive and influence a visitor's opportunity for solitude within the evaluated area.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there pervasive evidence of civilization from within the area? Consider proximity of area to high use areas, trailheads, private lands, roads, and/or activities that impact opportunities for solitude. Consider frequency of impacts and seasonal variabilities. • Describe the general topography of the area for its visual, spatial, and acoustic environment. • Consider how people travel across the landscape. • Consider the differences between urban and rural ideas of solitude. • Include any additional information related to the question.
<p><u>Question 2b.</u> Consider the opportunity to engage in primitive-type or unconfined recreation activities that lead to a visitor's ability to feel a part of nature.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the types of primitive recreation (hunting, fishing, dispersed camping, hiking, rock climbing, etc.) activities in the area. • Describe the amount of non-primitive recreation (mountain biking, motorized recreation, fee sites, boating, etc.) activities in the area. • Percent of land with primitive classification on the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum. • Is the area relatively free of restrictions on visitor behavior, providing an unconfined experience? • What is the level of challenge and risk in the area? • Include any additional information related to the question.

Criterion 3: Size

This criterion evaluates if an area less than 5,000 acres is of sufficient size to make its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition practicable.

Table 3: Size Criteria

Evaluation Criteria Identified in Planning Directives	Evaluation Criteria Further Defined by Tonto National Forest
<p><u>Question 3a.</u> Evaluate how an area less than 5,000 acres is of sufficient size to make its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition practicable.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider areas less than 5,000 acres if they are adjacent to another Wilderness area – or an area proposed to be one. • Consider primitive areas, or areas that are part of another wilderness inventory on an adjacent land management agency unit. • Consider if areas smaller than 5,000 acres can be combined.

Criterion 4: Unique and Outstanding Qualities

This criterion evaluates the degree to which the area may contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value. These values are not required to be present in an area for the area to be recommended for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System, but their presence should be identified and evaluated where they exist.

When evaluating unique and outstanding qualities, consider if the feature is iconic, unique at a regional or national scale, and the extent that the feature defines how people think about and value the area.

Table 4. Unique and Outstanding Qualities Criteria

Evaluation Criteria Identified in Planning Directives	Evaluation Criteria Further Defined by Tonto National Forest
<u>Question 4a.</u> Does the area contain rare plant or animal communities or rare ecosystems?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presence of rare species, endemic species, or species of conservation concern? • Presence of rare ecosystems? • Presence of uncommon habitats? • Include any additional information related to the question.
<u>Question 4b.</u> Are there any outstanding landscape features such as waterfalls, mountains, viewpoints, waterbodies, or geologic features?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe any outstanding and unique landscape features in the area, including their significance and extent that the feature defines how people value the area. • Identify any eligible Wild & Scenic Rivers. • Consider the density of outstanding or unique landscape features. • Include any additional information related to the question.
<u>Question 4c.</u> Are there historic and cultural resource sites in the area of regional or national significance?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presence of significant historic or cultural resources sites? • Consider if the feature is nationally recognized (for example, through an official designation such as the National Register) or if the features is considered a priority heritage asset. • Consider the density of historic/cultural sites in the area. • Include any additional information related to the question.
<u>Question 4d.</u> Are there any research natural areas?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percent of area that is part of a research natural area. • Include any additional information related to the question.
<u>Question 4e.</u> Are there any high quality water resources or important watershed features?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presence and extent of high quality water resources or important watershed features in the area. • Consider watershed conditions and eligible, suitable, or designated Wild & Scenic Rivers. • Include any additional information relate to the question.

Criterion 5: Manageability

This criterion evaluates the degree to which the area may be managed to preserve its wilderness characteristics, considering current conditions.

Table 5. Manageability Criteria

Evaluation Criteria Identified in Planning Directives	Evaluation Criteria Further Defined by Tonto National Forest
<p><u>Question 5a.</u> Can the area be managed to preserve its wilderness characteristics?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the shape and configuration of the area? Describe the boundary, edge to interior ratio, presence of cherry-stemmed roads, etc. • Describe the presence and extent of legally established rights or uses within the area and how these uses may support or impact managing an area for wilderness characteristics (e.g. active mining claims, special uses, cultural or traditional uses). • Consider the ability to use alternative approaches for managing the area for its wilderness characteristics. • Consider the impacts of restoration and/or treatments on the area that allow it to have wilderness characteristics. • Consider the presence and extent of any specific Federal or State laws that may be relevant to the area or the ability to manage the area to protect wilderness characteristics. • Describe the management of adjacent lands and consider current management plans, activities, and/or restrictions for the area. • Presence of Inventoried Roadless Area. Include percent if possible. • Include any additional information related to the question.