

3.15 Wilderness Characteristics

The Wilderness Act of 1964 established the National Wilderness Preservation System, which identified a system composed of federally-owned areas designated by Congress as “wilderness areas” and mandated that these lands shall be administered for the use and enjoyment of the American people in such manner as to leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment. The goal of the Wilderness Act was to “... secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefit of an enduring resource of wilderness”. The FLPMA, enacted by Congress in 1976, required that the BLM inventory, study, and review all 17 million acres of public land in California for their wilderness characteristics, as described in the Wilderness Act of 1964. Wilderness characteristics included naturalness, solitude, primitive and unconfined recreation, and special features. Based on the review, additional intensive studies were conducted on approximately 7.1 million acres in 209 areas of California. The areas designated for study and consideration to become designated wilderness areas are referred to by the BLM as WSAs. Within the CDCA, approximately 5.7 million acres in 137 WSAs were studied. The BLM recommended that 69 of the WSAs become designated wilderness. In 1994, these areas were officially designated as wilderness, and the California Desert Protection Act (CDPA) created eight additional WSAs.

3.15.1 Wilderness and Wilderness Study Areas

Wilderness characteristics for each WSA were described and evaluated by the BLM and then published in the BLM California Statewide Wilderness Study Report 1990. The characteristics described in the California State Wilderness Study Report (CSWSR) are as follows:

- ❖ Naturalness—study area must be in a generally natural condition;
- ❖ Size—study area must be at least 5,000 acres or large enough to preserve as wilderness;
- ❖ Opportunities for solitude, or primitive recreation—study area must have outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive or unconditioned type of recreation; and
- ❖ Special features—study area may contain ecological, geologic, or other features of scientific, scenic, or historic value (BLM 1990).

3.15.1.1 Designated Wilderness and Wilderness Study Areas

In 1994, the CDPA designated two wilderness areas, three WSAs, and one WSA to be further studied in the future for proposed WSA suitability. The specific areas are identified in the CDPA by reference to the following maps:

Wilderness

- ❖ Kingston Range Wilderness- Designated October 31, 1994.
- ❖ Hollow Hills Wilderness – Designated May 1991.

WSA

- ❖ Avawatz Mountains Wilderness-Proposed, dated May 1991;
- ❖ Kingston Range Potential Future Wilderness – Proposed, dated May 1994;

- ❖ Soda Mountains Wilderness-Proposed 1, dated May 1991 and Soda Mountains Wilderness-Proposed 2, dated January 1989; and

Proposed for Suitability Report

- ❖ Death Valley National Park Boundary and Wilderness 17-Proposed, dated July 1993 (CDPA 1994).

Figure 3.15-1 shows the locations of the WSAs. Table 3.15-1 below provides a description of the total acres of each WSA and the number of acres that fall within the study area boundaries.

Table 3.15-1: Wilderness Study Areas

WILDERNESS STUDY AREA	TOTAL ACRES IN STUDY AREA	TOTAL ACRES IN WILDERNESS STUDY AREA
Death Valley National Park Boundary and Wilderness Study Area	0	47,040
Avawatz Mountains Wilderness Study Area	0	41,800
Kingston Range Wilderness Study Area	0	42,273
Soda Mountains Wilderness Study Area	0	121,592
Kingston Range Wilderness	0	209,608
Hollow Hills Wilderness	0	22,240

Source: Shelly Jackson, BLM April 2002

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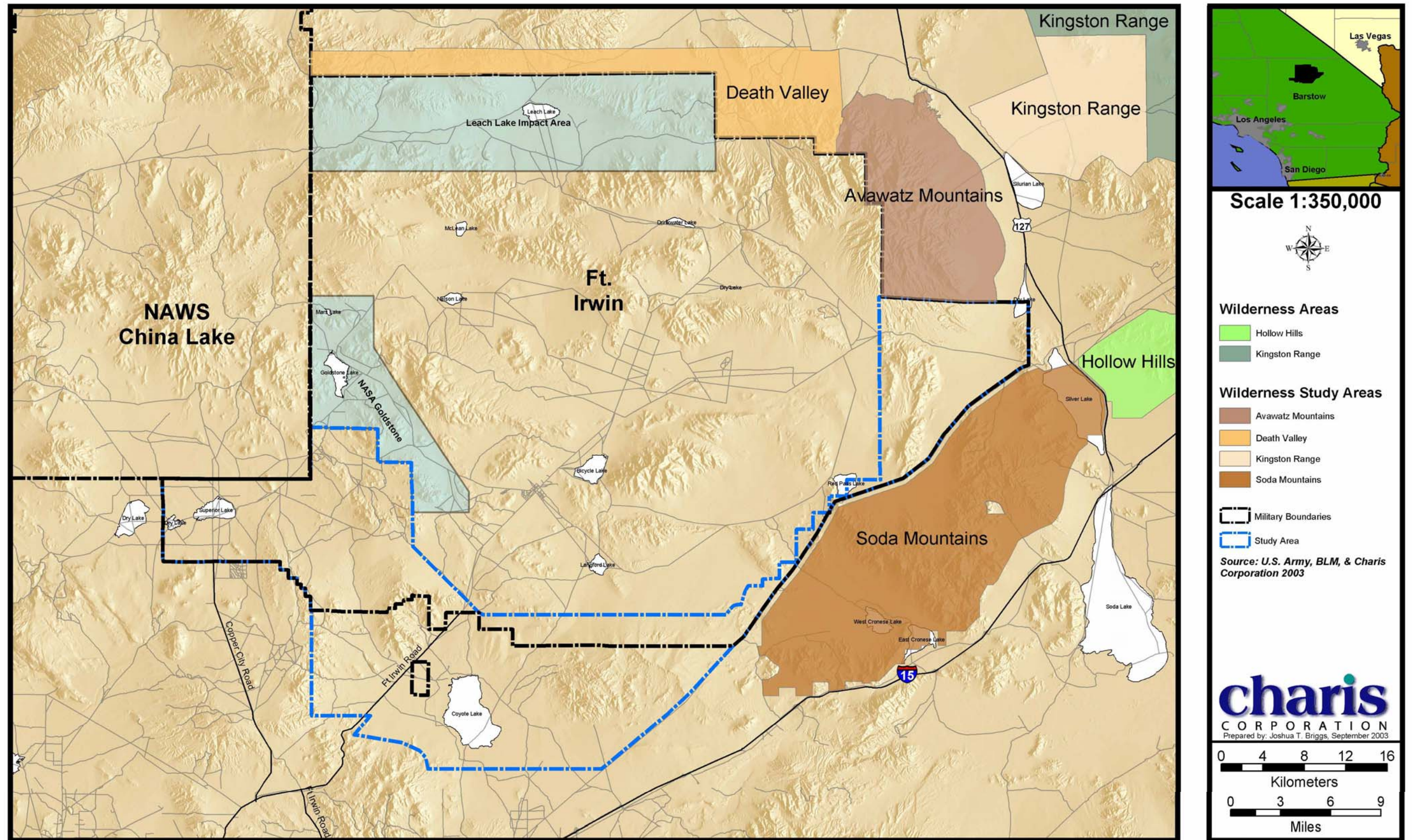


Figure 3.15-1: WSA Locations

Public lands within the WSAs continue to be managed according to BLM's Interim Management Policy for Lands Under Wilderness Review. Management is presently directed toward preserving the prospective and respective wilderness values of each WSA. WSAs are managed to avoid impairment of the potential wilderness values, and continue to be subject to the requirements of Section 603(c) of FLPMA pertaining to the management of WSAs in a manner that does not impair the suitability of such areas for the preservation of wilderness. WSAs are also withdrawn from all forms of entry, appropriation, or disposal under public land laws; from location, entry, and patent under U.S. mining laws; and from disposition under all laws pertaining to mineral and geothermal leasing and mineral materials.

3.15.1.2 Description of WSAs in the Study Area

There are no WSAs in the study area. The Avawatz Mountains WSA is north of the eastern portion of the study area. The Soda Mountains WSA is directly adjacent to the eastern boundary of the study area.

3.15.2 Wilderness Areas

There are no designated wilderness areas within the study area. The Hollow Hills Wilderness is to the east of the East Gate study area past Silver Lake. The Kingston Range Wilderness area is northeast of Fort Irwin. The wilderness areas within Death Valley National Park lie 2 km north of Fort Irwin's north boundary.

Of the remaining WSAs, BLM determined that the five WSAs (South Avawatz, Soda Mountain, Avawatz, Death Valley National Park Boundary and Wilderness, and Kingston Range Wilderness Study Area) were not suitable for wilderness designation and should be released into general use.

3.15.3 Adjacent Wilderness and Wilderness Study Areas

3.15.3.1 Avawatz Mountains WSA—Proposed, Dated May 1991

The Avawatz Mountains Proposed WSA is in the northern most part of the East Gate portion of the study area and comprises 51,720 acres. State Highway 127 lies to the east of the WSA, and its southern boundary lies above Silver Lake Road. The Fort Irwin boundary and a gravel road to Denning Springs make up the western border of this WSA.

The WSA consists of the eastern portion of the Avawatz Mountains that contain colorful eroded slopes, rugged ridges, and steep-walled, narrow canyons. The mountains are flanked to the east by a steeply descending creosote-covered bajada (a broad continuous alluvial slope) that transforms into dry lakebeds near State Highway 127. White talc deposits dot the landscape, and the northern portion provides outstanding views into Death Valley National Park. Elevations rise from 680 ft amsl near Silurian Dry Lake to a 6,162-ft AMSL summit within a distance of only 9 miles. Vegetation consists of a typical creosote bush scrub assemblage that exhibits some variability based on elevation and geology. The landforms, ecological diversity, and geologic features are not unique and are typical of features that are common throughout the surrounding deserts and mountains. The CSWSR recommended zero acres for wilderness designation.

3.15.3.2 Death Valley National Park Boundary and WSA - Proposed, Dated July 1993

The Death Valley National Park Boundary and Wilderness Study Area is between Fort Irwin to the south and the Death Valley National Park to the north. This WSA is approximately 60 miles north of Barstow and is accessible from I-15 via State Highway 127. It includes approximately

47,040 acres, of which 42,880 are public lands managed by the BLM, 1,600 acres are state lands, and 2,560 acres are private lands. The Denning Springs ACEC lies within this WSA

The area is characterized by three north-south mountain ranges with elevations that range from 1,695-4,988 ft AMSL. The ranges on the east and west appear metamorphic in nature, while the middle range shows a volcanic influence. Plant assemblages found in the area include the Mojave Creosote bush scrub and blackbush scrub located on alluvial slopes.

3.15.3.3 Kingston Range Wilderness - Dated May 1994

The Kingston Range Wilderness is in the northeastern part of the study area in the Silurian Valley, and comprises approximately 209,600 acres.

The irregular southern boundary of the Wilderness skirts private land and mining activities. The southwestern boundary winds around the Silurian Hills, primarily following dry washes and roads, but sometimes runs cross-country to exclude areas of mining activity. At the north end of the Silurian Hills, the boundary follows a road around the eastside of Silurian Dry Lake, emerging on State Highway 127. The western boundary follows the highway north for 5.5 miles and then swings sharply east to exclude the Dumont Dunes OHV Area.

The diverse terrain of the Kingston Range Wilderness includes several valleys, bajadas, major washes, and hills of varying form. To the northeast of the Wilderness is the Kingston Range proper. Approximately 17 miles of continuous ridgeline are above 6,000 ft AMSL, capped by Kingston Peak at 7,323 ft AMSL. The range can be described as an island of mountain environments within a sea of desert lowlands. A bajada slopes south from the Kingston Range and leads to the very broad, often steep-walled Kingston Wash. South of the wash lie the Shadow Mountains, a large series of low-lying rounded peaks with gently meandering interior canyons and numerous erosion channels. The Dumont Hills, located west of the Kingston Range, are a series of hills standing out from a highly eroded bajada that separates the range from Silurian Valley.

The vegetation is creosote bush scrub at lower elevations and pinyon-juniper woodland at higher elevations. A small stand of white fir occurs at the upper elevations north of Kingston Peak. Several UPAs are found within the WSA. Kingston Springs contains several plant species, including the *Penstemon stephensii*, which are not found anywhere else.

The Kingston Range Wilderness contains a few springs that have been developed but are still natural in appearance. Some mineral exploration activities, including adits, posts, and monuments associated with mining claim locations, and occasional traces of vehicle use are noticeable within the Wilderness.

The area presents opportunities for hiking, hunting, nature study, and photography. One of the most interesting features of this area is the superb long-distance view framed by the granite boulders and wooded slopes of the Kingston Mountains. Kingston Peak is recognized as a challenge for climbers and is included on the Sierra Club's list of "California Desert Peaks."

Several geologic formations within the Kingston Range Wilderness are important for the fossils they contain. The oldest is the Pahrump Group estimated at an age of 1,200 million years. The Pahrump Group is highly important to the study of early evolutionary development. The local strata within the Wilderness are one of the few places where rocks spanning the transition between the Pre-Cambrian and Cambrian ages are displayed.

3.15.3.4 Kingston Range Potential Future WSA, Dated May 1994

The Kingston Range Potential Future WSA comprises approximately 42,270 acres of land (not designated Wilderness in the Kingston Range Wilderness earlier in the CDPA). The Kingston Range Potential Future WSA includes the Tonopah and Tidewater Railroad.

3.15.3.5 Soda Mountains WSA-Proposed 1, Dated May 1991 and Soda Mountains Wilderness-Proposed 2, Dated January 1989

The Soda Mountains WSA is in San Bernardino County, in the north-central portion of the CDCA. The community of Baker is less than one mile from the southeastern edge of the WSA. The WSA includes approximately 121,590 acres.

The northern boundary of the WSA is Silver Lake Road and a boundary line that runs 400 ft south of three high-voltage transmission lines that were in place in 1979. Where the service road extends beyond 400 ft, it becomes the boundary. A gravel road forms the western boundary. The southern boundary generally parallels Interstate 15, following topographic lines and a power-line maintenance road. State Highway 127 forms the eastern boundary. Portions of the WSA are within a utility corridor (Corridor D) designated in the CDCA Plan. The high-tension power transmission lines create a distinct linear, unnatural feature along the entire northern border.

The topography of the WSA varies from several gently sloping bajadas to the rugged terrain of the Soda Mountains. This highly eroded mountain range has jagged ridges and sharp peaks that reach 3,663 ft amsl. The associated canyons have steep rocky walls that vary in color from brown at the base to red in the center and gold near the top. Within the range are large interior valleys created by erosion. The bajadas are interlaced with washes and slope away from the mountains toward the WSA's boundaries. The West Cronese, East Cronese, and Silver Dry Lakes are within the WSA.

Vegetation consists primarily of creosote bush scrub and salt bush/desert sink communities. The latter community occupies lower elevations of alluvial fans, while creosote bush scrub occurs on more upland areas. Approximately 90 percent of the Cronese Basin ACEC is within the boundaries of the WSA. This ACEC is outside the southeast boundary of the study area.

The Cronese Basin contains significant cultural resources and Native American concerns. These values are currently managed and protected by the Cronese Lakes ACEC, which lies outside the study area. Two sensitive plant species, *Androstephium breviflorum* and *Linanthus arenicola*, are present on the south boundary of the area. The CSWSR recommended zero acres for wilderness designation.