A Jewel Of A River

Because the Upper Selway holds the headwaters of the Selway River, the region represents to many people the heart-beat of the wilderness area. Of all the rivers not under consideration for a national wild rivers system, the Selway is the jewel — one of the few true wilderness streams remaining in the U.S. outside of Alaska. It is increasingly used by white-water enthusiasts, by fishermen and wilderness campers.

At the moment, only about 45 miles of the Selway is protected. The Forest Service has said the Selway and other streams will be protected. How will this be done? According to Harold C. Anderson, Supervisor of the Bitterroot National Forest, a riverbreak zone, averaging a mile in width, will be set up on each side of the river and along important feeder streams.

This looks good on paper, but will it keep the Selway safe from the effects of erosion? Conservationists do not think so.

Stock grazing and mining are not factors in the multiple-use plans, according to Rahm. The recreational potential of the Upper Selway will be utilized in a number of ways. Road improvement is the most important, but semi-primitive picnic and camping sites will be set up as well as outlying hunter camps. Identification signs for scenic views and some historical, interpretive signs will be erected.

Roadside, streamside, and lakeside viewing areas will be provided.

These plans have considerable appeal to a great many people, but not to those who dislike overcrowded managed areas with “canned” recreation features.

“Must we have super highways leading into our wilderness areas?” asks Mrs. Doris Milner, chairman of the Save- The-Upper Selway Committee, at Hamilton, Mont. “The present road system is ideal for edge-of-wilderness travel. Forest Service plans, if carried out, will make the Upper Selway a carriageway of other over-managed recreation areas. We need such areas; but even more, we need the unique qualities found only in wilderness areas.”

Mrs. Milner points out that travel in the Selway-Bitterroot and other wilderness areas is increasing each year. This travel is by foot, by horseback, and by canoe — wilderness travel.

Mrs. Milner’s committee is only one of several regional groups organized to counter Forest Service plans for the Upper Selway. Another is the North Idaho Wilderness Committee at Lewiston, with Morton R. Brigham as chairman.

“It’s the logging and the road building which has us really worried,” says Brigham. “The Upper Selway has soft, thin soil and steep hillsides — so you can’t escape erosion. At best, logging in the area will be costly and a marginal operation. The Forest Service has said the allowable annual cut will be 12 million board feet. This would keep a small sawmill busy only a fraction of a year.”

According to Rahm, from 117,600 to 175,000 acres has commercial timber totaling a possible one billion board feet. He maintains that most of the logging will be some distance from the Selway River.
The Upper Selway and the million-acre-plus wilderness area is a wildlife paradise. One of the nation's largest elk herds roam in this immense and diverse country. Mule deer and elk are plentiful, and there are mountain goats, bighorn sheep, bears, and increasing numbers of moose. Abundant, too, are small game, furbearers, and predators such as the cougar and the bobcat.

The Selway is a sportsman's dream—a place to try real wilderness hunting.

Logging is needed for the elk herds, particularly winter browse, according to Ed Norberg, Idaho Fish & Game Department game biologist. Much of the country which was burned over by forest fires in the 1920s and 1930s has now been overgrown with young conifers. Any effort to provide browse for the major elk herds will have to be elsewhere than in the Magruder District,” Morton Brigham states.

Logging would be mainly on the northern slopes and the elk don't use these slopes for winter range. And winter range is what is needed. If the Forest Service sets up buffer zones along the Selway and other streams — as they say they will do — no logging will take place in the zones. Therefore no browse will be provided in areas where elk concentrate in the winter.”

Brigham based his conclusions on personal observations — he's hunted the Selway for years — and on the 1958-57 winter survey of big game made by Norberg. Almost 7,000 elk were counted in the Selway drainage, and fewer than 600 of these were above White Cap Creek, and only 186 above the Magruder Ranger Station. Logging is proposed for these areas.

Road building and logging could also be a disturbing influence on the bands of mountain goats and bighorns. Present access roads are more than adequate, Brigham believes, for entry into the wilderness area. At any rate, roads become snowed in early in the Selway country, so they can be used only during the early part of the big game season.

A large number of western senators and representatives have taken an active interest in the Upper Selway problems, including Rep. Arnold Olson of Montana, Sen. Maurer of Oregon, and Sen. Frank Church of Idaho.

In a recent letter to this reporter, Senator Church wrote: "I have just completed writing a long letter to the secretary of agriculture asking for a detailed explanation as to why the area was left out of the Forest Service and also a request for some definite answers as to FS plans for the Upper Selway. I have, as you know, had the wild river designation for the Selway extended from the Magruder Ranger Station to Thompson Flat, which I think will afford the area some needed protection.

"Stressed to the secretary that the effectiveness of the wild river category for the Selway could be impaired unless proper conservation methods are applied in the watershed.

Are proposed Forest Service plans for proper conservation methods? The economic returns of the timber in the Upper Selway do not seem to justify the great risks to other more important resources in the area. The deletion of Area "E" from wilderness protection in the first place is highly questionable.

Like any government bureau with large responsibilities, the Forest Service is subject to pressure from all sorts of conflicting interests. And even within the Forest Service itself, opinions as to what should be done with the Upper Selway are by no means unanimous. The decisions being made at the administrative level are privately opposed by some Forest Service people down the line.

That is not unusual; what is surprising is the Forest Service's apparent reversal in its case over a time-honored policy.

The concept of wilderness preservation has been a part of Forest Service tradition since 1924, when a wilderness type unit was established in New Mexico's Gila River National Forest. It was a long step forward in the history of conservation, for few people then shared the Forest Service's view of the need to retain a part of primitive America.

Today the Forest Service has a tremendous responsibility in the guardianship of 54 wilderness areas and 34 primitive areas — plus the entire national forest system. Within 10 years the primitive areas must be reclassified under the Wilderness Act. Other Upper Selway situations will arise — in fact there are many of them throughout the West right now.

Over in northeastern Oregon, the Minam River Canyon is a storm center, and in Montana the Middle Fork of the Flathead River, among other areas, is embroiled in controversy. These are not purely state or regional problems, they are national problems for they involve the public lands and rivers which belong to all of the people of the United States.

These lands belonging to future generations, too. We have to keep that in mind as the destiny of each area is decided. In the case of the Upper Selway, conservationists feel that too many questions remain unanswered. Time, they say, is needed for all the surveys of the area's economic and recreational resources and for public discussion of the issues.