

Safeguarding the Roadless Rule: Implications for Arizona

The following examples describe Arizona-specific implications that Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRA) have for the state's expansive public lands, communities, outdoor recreation opportunities, and wildlife. Arizona champions **1,174,000 acres¹ of IRAs** created by the original 2001 Roadless Rule. Codifying the Roadless Rule via the **Roadless Area Conservation Act** is a key step toward protecting these resources for current and future generations of Arizonans.

Outdoor Recreation

- IRAs offer premier hunting areas for sportsmen – particularly hunters who value a more natural and challenging backcountry experience. Similarly, recreational users seeking solitude and quiet recreational opportunities value and visit IRAs preferentially. Even when a recreational activity occurs outside an IRA, IRAs are frequently the scenic background. For example: on the **Prescott National Forest**, the Muldoon IRA is along the proposed Upper Verde Wild and Scenic River, while the Black Canyon IRA hosts a popular trail for hiking, biking, and horseback riding, with access to technical canyoneering.
- On the **Tonto National Forest**, the Arizona National Scenic Trail crosses through the Mazatzal and Boulder IRAs, the Goldfield IRA borders Saguaro Lake, the Black Cross IRA borders Canyon Lake, and the Horse Mesa IRA borders Apache Lake. These all provide scenic backgrounds for boaters. Meanwhile, the Picacho IRA borders the Salt River, providing a scenic background and camping area for boaters running the Salt River Wilderness run.
- On the **Kaibab National Forest**, the Arizona National Scenic Trail follows the western edge of the Coconino Rim, Big Ridge, and Red Point IRAs. On the **Coconino National Forest**, the East Clear Creek IRA is crossed by the Cabin Loops trail, which passes by four historic USFS fire lookout or ranger cabins and is popular for backpackers, horse packers, mountain bikers, and backcountry anglers.
- On the **Coronado National Forest** in southeast Arizona, the Arizona National Scenic Trail crosses through the Oracle, Butterfly, Upper Rincon, and Santa Rita IRAs while the Winchester IRA is one of the most prized hunting areas (deer, dove, quail, javelina) in southeast Arizona. And on the **Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest**, the Chevelon Canyon IRA is popular for pack-in fly fishing for trout and the Black River Canyon IRA offers prized backcountry trout fishing.

Tribes

- IRAs often overlap with areas of important cultural significance to many of Arizona's Tribal Nations. For example, the **Apache Holy Mountains** include many of the Sky Island ranges of the **Coronado National Forest** and the IRAs therein.

¹ [Forest Service Inventoried Roadless Areas - Arizona](#)

- Several IRAs are within the boundaries of former Reservations subsequently revoked by the United States. IRAs on the **Coronado National Forest** in the Chiricahua and Dragoon Mountains were included in the original Chiricahua Indian reservation, while portions of those in the Pinaleno, Galiuro, and Santa Teresa Mountains, particularly for **San Carlos and White Mountain Apache**, were included in the original Fort Apache reservation and later removed.
- On the **Prescott National Forest**, Verde Ranger District, IRAs cover lands which were included within the 1871 Rio Verde/Camp Verde Indian Reserve which was later drastically downsized to the current **Yavapai-Apache Reservations**.

Wildlife

- Ecologically, IRAs offer both intact core habitat for wildlife as well as intact wildlife connectivity corridors, which are necessary for seasonal migrations or for animals to move to find forage, water, mates, or to escape disturbances.
- On the **Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest**, sizable IRAs around the **Blue Range Primitive Area** offer high elevation core habitat for elk, deer, bear, Mexican gray wolves, trout, and more than 400 other species. These areas are adjacent to protected lands across the state line in New Mexico, making the Greater Gila and Blue Range Primitive Area the largest unroaded natural landscape in the lower 48 states.
- On the **Kaibab National Forest**, a long stretch of IRA on the north rim of the Grand Canyon offers wildlife connectivity between **Grand Canyon National Park, Baaj Nwaavjo I'tah Kukveni – Ancestral Footprints of the Grand Canyon National Monument, and Grand Staircase-Escalante and Vermilion Cliffs National Monuments**.
- On the **Coronado National Forest**, IRAs protect core habitat blocks in the **Sky Islands** – a world biodiversity hotspot. Due to the discontinuous nature of the Sky Islands and the Coronado, these IRAs are also critical wildlife connectivity nodes. The **Whetstone Mountains**, for example, is a modest range that is the hub for four wildlife linkages where there have been confirmed jaguar and ocelot sightings.
- The Whetstone Mountains are the uplands of **Kartchner Caverns** – a living cave system and crown jewel of Arizona State Parks. The stalactites, stalagmites, and other formations in Kartchner are still being formed by the movement of water through the fractured karst system of the Whetstones (by contrast, popular caves such as Luray and Carlsbad are now dry with no additional formation occurring). More than the formations, the living cave system is also home to a nursery roost of cave myotis bats and rare and newly-identified species – research by the University of Arizona has identified 987 macroinvertebrate species in the cave, including 16 that are new to science. The continued functioning of Kartchner Caverns is dependent upon the uplands of the Whetstone Mountains and protected by the IRA there.

Wildfire & Fire Ignition

- Retaining existing IRAs also plays an important role in reducing human-caused wildfire ignition.
- Across the U.S. Forest Service, ~100-meter road buffers often exhibit high wildfire-ignition density when compared to other land use classes (such as wilderness). That includes in USFS Region 3, which is primarily comprised of national forests in Arizona and New Mexico.
- A 2022 study conducted by The Wilderness Society found that between 2000 and 2018, ~100-meter road buffers resulted in the highest wildfire-ignition density – meaning **fires are more likely to spark near existing roads and infrastructure** (see Figure 1 below).
- Publicly available data from the National Interagency Fire Center² shows that **since 1992, there have been over 8,000 fires that started within 100 meters of a road in Arizona** (6 times greater than the number of fires that have started in roadless areas during the same timeframe).
 - The density of wildfire ignitions within 100 meters of a road is also much greater than within roadless areas, with over 18 wildfire ignitions per 1,000 hectares compared to 3 per 1,000 hectares in roadless areas.
- The reality of roads and wildfire has big implications for Arizona, which continues to grapple with frequent wildfires amid historic drought conditions.

² National Interagency Fire Center – [InFORM Database](#)

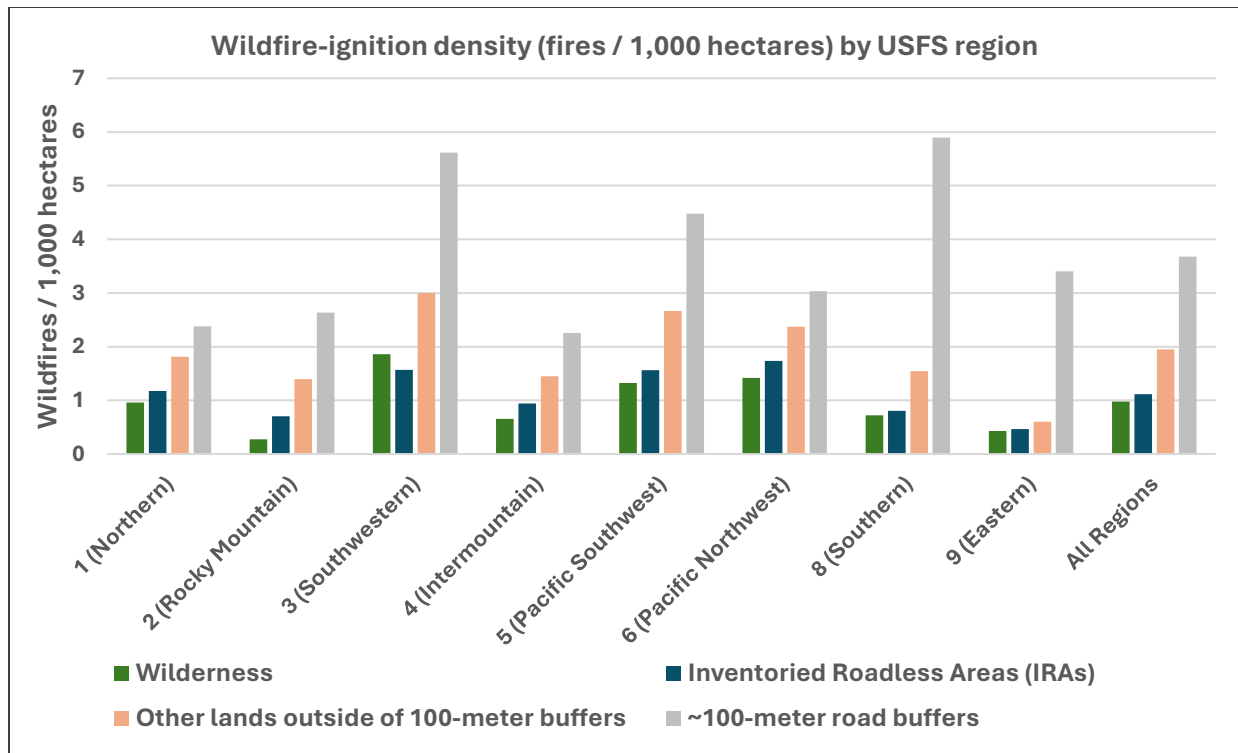


Figure 1. Wildfire-ignition density across U.S. Forest Service Regions by wilderness, inventoried roadless areas, other lands outside of 100-meter road buffers, and lands inside 100-meter road buffers.