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United States Department of Agriculture • Office of Communications • 1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250-1300 • Voice: (202) 720-4623 • Email: oc.news@usda.gov • Web: <http://www.usda.gov>

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Julie Quick (202) 720-4623
Dan Jiron (202) 205-0896

VENEMAN ACTS TO CONSERVE ROADLESS AREAS IN NATIONAL FORESTS *Announces National Advisory Committee to Help Implement New Rules*

BOISE, Idaho, July 12, 2004 – Agriculture Secretary Ann M. Veneman today announced the reinstatement of an interim directive to conserve roadless areas and proposed a new rule that continues the cooperative conservation of roadless areas in national forests and grasslands.

“Our actions today advance President Bush’s commitment to cooperatively conserving roadless areas on national forests,” Veneman said. “The prospect of endless lawsuits represents neither progress, nor certainty for communities. Our announcements today illustrate our commitment to working closely with the nation’s governors to meet the needs of local communities, and to maintaining the undeveloped character of the most pristine areas of the National Forest System.”

The prior administration finalized its roadless rule in January 2001. Since then it has been the target of litigation in Alaska, Idaho, Utah, North Dakota, Wyoming and the District of Columbia. In June 2003, a federal court struck down the 2001 roadless rule, concluding that it violated the National Environmental Policy Act and the Wilderness Act.

During an event here at the State Capitol with Governor Dirk Kempthorne and Senator Larry Craig to announce the new rule, Secretary Veneman said that the Forest Service would reinstate an interim directive to conserve roadless areas that were afforded protection by the 2001 rule. Even though the Forest Service has not moved to develop these areas, they have not been under a national rule since the District Court for the District of Wyoming permanently enjoined implementation of the 2001 rule last July. The interim directive will remain in effect for a period of 18 months after the finalization of a new roadless rule being proposed today.

The new rule sets a new, straightforward collaborative path to conserving roadless areas by working with the states on state-specific regulations. During the rulemaking process, Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth will maintain interim measures to conserve roadless areas.

The actions are based on five common-sense, conservation principles:

- Make informed decisions to ensure the roadless rule is implemented with more reliable information and accurate mapping, including local expertise and experience;
- Work with states, tribes, local communities and the public through a process that is fair, open and responsive to local input and information;
- Protect forests to ensure that the potential negative effects of severe wildfire, insect and disease activity are addressed;

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- Protect communities, homes, and property from the risk of severe wildfire and other risks that might exist on adjacent federal lands; and,
- Ensure that states, tribes, and private citizens who own property within roadless areas have access to their property as required by existing law.

The proposed rule establishes a process for governors to work with the Forest Service to develop locally-supported rules for conserving roadless areas in their states. While there are 39 states that have “inventoried” roadless areas on National Forest System lands within their boundaries, just 12 states contain 56.6 million acres, or 97 percent, of all roadless areas in the country. Those states are: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming.

“State governments are important partners in the stewardship of the nation’s land and natural resources,” Veneman said. “Strong state and federal cooperation in the management of roadless areas will foster strong local involvement and support for a final policy.”

The new proposal would offer the governors the opportunity to work with USDA on collaborative state-specific rulemakings for the conservation and management of roadless areas. Petitions would identify areas for inclusion, and ways to protect public health and safety, reduce wildfire risks to communities and critical wildlife habitat, maintain critical infrastructure, such as dams and utilities, and assure citizens access to private property.

Once the state finished its petition process, the Forest Service would publish a subsequent rulemaking for inventoried roadless areas within a petitioning state. Each state-specific rulemaking will include the required National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis and input from the public during the notice and comment period. Petitions would have to be submitted within 18 months of the effective date of a final rule.

Separately, Veneman also proposed establishing a national advisory committee to provide expert consultation for implementing the state-specific petition rulemaking process. Members of the committee would include experts in fish and wildlife biology, fish and wildlife management, forest management, outdoor recreation, and other relevant disciplines.

The proposed rule will be published in the *Federal Register* this week and is available at www.fs.fed.us. There is a 60-day public comment period on the proposed rule. Written comments on the proposed rule may be mailed to: Content Analysis Team, ATTN: Roadless State Petitions, USDA Forest Service, P.O. Box 221090, Salt Lake City, UT 84122; faxed to (801) 517-1014; or e-mailed to statepetitionroadless@fs.fed.us. Comments also may be submitted from: <http://www.regulations.gov>. The Forest Service will issue a final rule after it evaluates public comments.