

Letter From the Chief

As you may already know, in an announcement on the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests yesterday, President Clinton directed the Forest Service to develop a proposal to protect over 40 million acres of inventoried roadless areas on National Forests. We will subject our proposal to a thorough and open public process. This proposal places the Forest Service at the forefront of one of the most significant conservation efforts in United States history.

The public process will be initiated with the publication in the Federal Register of a Notice of Intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement to examine alternative methods to meet the goals established by the President. We will examine alternatives that limit or eliminate certain activities in inventoried roadless areas such as road construction. The proposal will also establish a process for identifying the social and ecological values that make roadless areas of all sizes important and unique. The final rule is expected in late 2000.

By addressing forest fragmentation and the loss of open space, this initiative responds to public desires concerning the conservation and use of National Forests. Clean water, biological diversity, wildlife and fish habitat, and the dispersed recreation opportunities found within roadless areas are precious resources to us all.

Roads can leave indelible marks on the land. Poorly maintained roads can contribute to erosion, landslides, and slope failure. Road construction may allow the entry of exotic and noxious species, increased person-caused fires, disrupted habitat connectivity, and otherwise compromise the attributes that make roadless areas socially and ecologically important.

The need to address the issue of roadless areas is also compelled by the fact that the Forest Service lacks the required resources to manage its existing road system. We cannot afford to take care of our 380,000 mile road system. We receive only about 20 percent of the funding needed to maintain our roads to safety and environmental standards. Our accumulated backlog on road reconstruction and maintenance exceeds \$8 billion. Building new roads into presently roadless areas makes little sense if we cannot afford to take care of the ones we already have.

We don't have a single "No Trespassing" sign on 192 million acres of public land. Our intent is to keep it that way. No roads or trails will be closed as a result of this proposal. All we are proposing is to begin an open and public dialogue with the American people. This proposal does not affect ongoing projects and the interim suspension of road construction in roadless areas remains in effect.

I am excited about the profound effect this proposal could have on the National Forests and Grasslands we leave to our children and grandchildren. Roads and roadless areas have posed management problems for the Forest Service for many years. It is time to move forward and address these issues in an open and public forum. For more information on this initiative, please see the Forest Service internal website address at fsweb.wo.fs.fed.us/pao/roadless.

/s/ Mike Dombeck

MIKE DOMBECK

Chief