

United States Department of Agriculture

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Date: December 29, 1999

An Opportunity

Twenty years of local planning efforts, wilderness debates, appeals, lawsuits, and injunctions have not solved the issue of long-term management of some 50 million acres of roadless areas in our national forest system. As a result, the Forest Service has embarked on a national initiative to determine how the American people want these lands managed. After decades of debate, controversy, and litigation, we are engaging the American people in this much-needed dialogue.

Although roadless areas represent less than one percent of the American landmass, they serve as a reservoir of rare and vanishing values. They provide clean drinking water, habitat for fish and wildlife, abundant hunting and fishing, recreation opportunities, reference areas for research, and barriers against noxious and invasive species. In the face of growing sprawl and urbanization, the values of national forest roadless lands are immeasurable.

Between 1992 and 1997, nearly 16 million acres of forest, farms, and open space were converted to urban or other uses. In less than a decade the rate of loss of undeveloped land has doubled. This helps to explain why the Forest Service is asking the American people about how they want their remaining wild and undeveloped roadless areas protected and managed. What distinguishes a truly wealthy nation from one that merely generates wealth is the foresight and wisdom to leave behind a richer legacy than we inherited, to make short-term sacrifices to advance long-term gains, to proceed humbly and cautiously in managing our natural resource endowment.

Some have suggested that we are attempting to create de facto wilderness and to "block access to the people's land." Nothing could be further from the truth. In 1997, 860 million national forest visitors took advantage of more than 23,000 recreation facilities and hundreds of thousands of miles of forest roads, trails and scenic byways.

As part of our public roadless area rulemaking process, we recently completed an unprecedented 190 meetings on every national forest in the nation. Thousands of people participated in the public process. We have received well over 200,000 written comments. In addition, we will hold a second round of meetings and public comment in the spring. The American people want this debate. The alternative is to continue to leave the issue for the lawyers and courts to decide.

The Forest Service is committed to providing access for the full array of commodity and recreation uses of national forests such as timber harvest, mining, off-road vehicles, snowmobiles, hiking, horse trails, mountain biking, and other forms of recreation that allow an increasingly urbanized society to enjoy the great outdoors. I anticipate that our roadless rulemaking will provide general direction for certain national issues and allow other decisions that lend themselves to local resolution to be made at the appropriate scale. Yet, multiple use does not mean we should do everything on every acre, simply because we can.

Many are pleased with the roadless initiative: many are not. Indeed, this deeply value-laden issue makes for a messy, frustrating, and sometimes-awkward process. To my way of thinking, this is precisely as it should be. As Winston Churchill once said, "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others." These are the people's lands, and their voices will be heard.

In the 21st century, our greatest challenges are less technical or scientific than they are ethical and social. More and more, we recognize the inextricable link between the quality of our lives and the health of the lands and waters that surround us. As our lands are fragmented at alarming rates, do we have the collective wisdom and humility to pause in the face of pressure to develop the last roadless areas? It is time to answer this question.

//s// **Mike Dombeck**

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