

# **Overview of Forest Service Initiatives**

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## **Roadless Areas, Existing Road Management, and Forest Planning**

The proposed roadless area initiative, road management policy, and planning rule are three separate and distinct Forest Service initiatives that together form a coherent strategy for dealing with vital conservation issues. Together, the roadless area initiative and road management policy form a two part strategy for addressing national and local concerns about the future of roadless areas and the existing national forest road system. The roadless area initiative addresses those areas that do not already have roads. The road management policy addresses the more than 380,000 miles of road already in the national forest transportation system.

Similarly, if the three initiatives are adopted, the planning rule would provide the overarching framework for implementing the roadless area proposal and roads policy. All of these initiatives seek to provide for long-term sustainability, ensure collaboration with the public, integrate science into the process, and incorporate new information and opportunities.

## **Roadless Area Initiative**

In October 1999, President Clinton asked the Forest Service to begin an open public process to address how roadless areas within the national forest system would be managed in the future. Roadless areas have typically remained without roads because of inaccessibility, rugged terrain, low timber values, or environmental concerns. Addressing this issue is important because:

- Prior to the President's announcement, the Forest Service received a large number of public comments asking the agency to provide additional protection for roadless areas;
- Roadless areas often provide clean water, wildlife habitat, aesthetic values, recreational opportunities, and other important values; and,
- The Forest Service would prefer to invest resources in projects that have broader public support, less cost, and fewer environmental impacts than building roads in roadless areas.

The Forest Service released a notice of intent (NOI) to prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) on October 19, 1999 and proposed a two part process. Part one would restrict certain activities, such as new road construction, in inventoried roadless areas. Part two would establish national direction for managing inventoried roadless areas, and for determining whether and to what extent similar protections should be extended to uninventoried roadless areas. Both part one and part two would be implemented with extensive public involvement. Part two would be implemented through local forest planning.

On December 20, 1999, the Forest Service concluded a comment period on the scope of the proposal. During this comment period, the agency hosted an unprecedented 190 regional and local public meetings and received more than 400,000 comments. The Forest Service is now preparing a draft environmental impact statement that will detail the agency's proposal and its likely effects. The agency plans to conduct another comment period and series of public meetings when it releases the draft environmental impact statement and a proposed rule in May 2000. The agency plans to release a final environmental impact statement and regulation before the end of 2000.

## **Proposed Road Management Policy**

This policy would revise how the Forest Service manages the more than 380,000 miles of road already in the national forest transportation system. A draft rule and procedures will be released for public review in coming weeks. The policy is intended to:

- Make the existing forest road system safe, responsive to public needs, environmentally sound, affordable, and efficient to manage;
- Be implemented through extensive public involvement and analysis at the local level;

- Implement a scientific analysis procedure to help land managers and the public identify heavily used roads that need to be maintained or upgraded and roads that are unused or environmentally damaging that can be decommissioned; and,
- Place a new emphasis on maintaining and reconstructing existing roads rather than building new roads, given the extensive road system that is already in place in most national forests.

### **Proposed Planning Rule**

The proposed planning rule would rewrite the existing Forest Service regulations implementing the National Forest Management Act. The proposed rule is based on the recommendations of a Committee of Scientists and 20 years of experience implementing forest planning. The rule:

- Bases forest and grassland planning on the principles of ecological, economic, and social sustainability;
- Requires the Forest Service to actively engage the public and our other federal, state, local, and tribal partners in the management of our national forests and grasslands;
- Integrates science and scientists into the planning process and requires the Forest Service to focus on managing entire ecosystems rather than single species or outcomes; and,
- Integrates planning and management activities more closely so that the Forest Service can respond to new information and opportunities in a timely manner.

Last fall the Forest Service hosted a series of 23 town meetings across the country to discuss the proposed planning rule. The agency will continue to accept written comments on the proposed rule until the comment period closes February 3, 2000.