

Statement of Mike Dombeck

Chief of the Forest Service

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On October 13, 1999, President Clinton charged the Forest Service to develop options to further protect for future generations “some of the last, best, unprotected wildland anywhere in our nation.” In keeping with the President’s directive and the long Forest Service legacy of conservation, I am pleased to announce today that the Forest Service is proposing to end road construction in nearly one quarter of the 192 million acre National Forest System.

Over 25 years of local planning, lawsuits, and controversy have failed to resolve the roadless area issue. New leadership and new direction are needed. This proposal would ensure that the greatest threat to the values of roadless lands is removed and that their important characteristics are evaluated and protected as appropriate through forest planning at the local level.

Over the past five years, we have seen dramatic increases in the loss of open space, unfragmented lands, farms, and wetlands. In an increasingly urbanized and developed nation, roadless areas of the National Forest System become more and more valuable. They provide:

- Refuges for rare plant, wildlife and fish species.
- Clean, pure drinking water for thousands of communities.
- Opportunities for dispersed recreation.
- Reference areas for research and study.
- Places of solitude and spiritual renewal where families may reconnect with the lands and waters that sustain them.

About a century ago, another President, Theodore Roosevelt once described conservation as “applying common sense to common problems for the common good.” I can think of few issues more relevant to Roosevelt’s definition than road construction into pristine wild areas.

The Forest Service backlog on maintenance and reconstruction of our existing road system is well over \$8 billion dollars. We currently receive about 20% of the funding that we need to take care of our existing road system. It makes little sense to build new roads into valuable roadless areas when we cannot afford to maintain so much of our existing road system.

Many have charged that protecting roadless areas will block public access to their public lands. This proposal proves them wrong. Not a single authorized road will be closed as a result of our roadless proposal. All existing and legal access would be preserved.

We are at a critical point of the public process. We will hold over 300 public meetings in communities large and small to explain this proposal and garner public input. Our proposal can, and will, be improved based on public involvement and review.

Many will argue this proposal does not go far enough. Others will say it goes too far. At its root, it is a measured and common sense proposal that ensures that the very values that draw hundreds of millions of Americans to their forests will be protected and preserved for the use and benefit of future generations.