

STATEMENT OF
JAMES R. FURNISH
DEPUTY CHIEF, NATIONAL FOREST SYSTEM
FOREST SERVICE
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Before the
Subcommittee on Forests and Public Lands Management
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
United States Senate
Regarding the Forest Service Roadless Area Conservation Proposal

July 26, 2000

MISTER CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Forest Service Roadless Area Conservation proposal. As you know, the objective of the proposal is to conserve and enhance the important social and ecological values of roadless areas within the National Forest System. As more and more private land, forests, open space, wetlands and farmland are developed and converted to urban uses, roadless areas have become increasingly important to Americans and their children.

On May 10, 2000, we published a proposed rule outlining a Forest Service proposal accompanied by a draft environmental impact statement (DEIS). The proposal would conserve roadless areas by generally prohibiting new road construction in inventoried roadless areas of the National Forest System. It would also require local managers to evaluate and consider roadless area characteristics in the context of overall multiple-use objectives during the revision of individual forest plans. Under the proposal, a final decision about conserving roadless areas on the Tongass National Forest would be postponed until a planned review of the revised forest plan in 2004. Along with the preferred alternative the agency is considering a range of alternatives, including taking no action.

The Forest Service's roadless proposal would eliminate the greatest threats to these critical areas at the national level and then allow local managers to consider additional protections in the future. This balanced approach is based on our belief that several inventories, a decade of forest plan revisions, Congressional appropriation debates, and litigation have failed to resolve the question of roadless area management. Our objective is to address the issues that merit national attention while leaving all others to local forest planning.

The public, state and local governments, and Congress have all been active participants in the debate over roadless areas. In January 1998, the agency initiated a process to consider changes in how the

Forest Service road system is developed, used, maintained, and funded and to suspend temporarily road construction in certain unroaded areas. This led to the current "interim rule" that temporarily suspended road construction and reconstruction in unroaded areas while we developed a long-term road management policy. The agency received more than 120,000 public comments on these efforts, the majority of which called for permanent protection of roadless areas.

As President Clinton emphasized during his announcement in October 1999, the American people increasingly recognize the inextricable link between the quality of their lives and the health of the lands and waters that surround them. Although roadless areas represent less than one percent of the American landmass, they serve as a reservoir of rare and vanishing resources.

Roadless areas provide clean drinking water, habitat for fish and wildlife, abundant hunting and fishing, recreation opportunities, and reference areas for research. In the face of growing sprawl and urbanization, these values have increased importance. Between 1992 and 1997, nearly 16 million acres of forest, farms, and open space were converted to urban or other uses. Roadless areas act as a barrier against noxious invasive plant and animal species and as strongholds for native fish populations. They often provide vital habitat and migration routes for numerous wildlife species and are particularly important for those requiring large home ranges. Many roadless areas also act as ecological anchors allowing nearby federal, state, and private lands to be developed for economic purposes. Road construction may increase the risk of erosion, landslides, and slope failure, endangering the health of watersheds that provide drinking water to local communities and critical habitat for fish and wildlife. These effects can be particularly acute in high elevation, erosion-prone roadless areas.

In recent years, the public has rightfully questioned whether the Forest Service should build new roads into controversial roadless areas when the agency has difficulty maintaining its existing road system. The current national forest road system includes 380,000 miles of roads. The agency also has a road reconstruction and maintenance backlog of approximately \$8.4 billion, and it receives only about 20 percent of the annual funding needed to maintain its road system up to safety and environmental standards.

For too long, others, such as litigants and interest groups, have controlled the debate over long-term management of roadless areas. It is time to involve the American people directly. Our objective is not to supplant the local forest planning process. Rather, we seek to resolve those parts of the roadless area issue that are national in scope. As a result, the local planning process will become less costly, less controversial, and more effective.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The Forest Service is conducting an unprecedented public outreach effort to solicit public comments on the roadless area conservation proposal. The initial opportunity for public involvement began on October 19, 1999, with the publication in the Federal Register of the Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare an environmental impact statement. Release of the NOI initiated a public scoping period that continued through issuance of the draft environmental impact statement and proposed rule. During this scoping period the Forest Service held more than 185 public meetings across the country and received over 500,000 comments.

On May 9, 2000, the agency started the just concluded public comment period on the proposed rule and draft environmental impact statement. The agency held an additional 424 meetings, including at least two meetings on every national forest across the country--one to explain the proposal and one to hear public comments. In total, the Forest Service has held more than 600 meetings on this proposal. The agency has posted its draft environmental impact statement and maps on the Internet and has distributed over 43,000 copies of the DEIS, almost 6,000 CD versions of the DEIS, and over 50,000 copies of the DEIS summary to interested individuals, local governments, and other agencies. In addition, the agency also distributed copies of the DEIS to over 10,000 public libraries across the country.

I think this speaks to the national significance and public concern over this issue. Our goal is to ensure that the American people understand what is being proposed and to hear what they think about our proposal, so that we can make the best decision possible about the future management of these lands.

STATUS OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

As mentioned earlier, the agency published a draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) and proposed rule for public review on May 10, 2000. The Forest Service accepted comment on those documents through July 17, 2000. The DEIS outlines specific action alternatives along with a no action alternative to provide a detailed basis for discussion with the public about how roadless areas could be managed in the future.

The alternatives examine a range of prohibitions in inventoried roadless areas such as limitations on road construction and timber harvest in unroaded portions of inventoried roadless areas. National prohibitions of certain activities, such as road construction and reconstruction, could affect from 43 to 54 million acres of inventoried roadless areas. Roughly 38 percent of these areas are already in management designations that do not allow for road construction.

The DEIS also contains a range of procedural alternatives which would require the evaluation and consideration of roadless area characteristics and values through land management planning or during project planning.

In addition, there are a range of alternatives unique to the Tongass National Forest. Along with these specific Tongass alternatives, the prohibition and procedural alternatives that address the rest of the National Forest System could also be applied to the Tongass National Forest. The agency may choose to combine portions of the prohibition, procedural, and Tongass alternatives in the final rule.

Under all prohibition alternatives, roads may still be built in inventoried roadless areas: 1) to protect public health and safety in cases of imminent threat of flood, fire, or other catastrophic event, that without intervention, would cause loss of life or property; 2) when needed to comply with other federal laws; 3) when needed pursuant to reserved or outstanding rights or as provided for statute or treaty; or 4) when road alignment is needed to prevent irreparable resource damage that cannot be prevented by road maintenance.

After the close of the comment period, the agency will analyze the comments, refine and improve the

analysis of effects, and issue a final EIS and rule later this year.

ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS

The draft environmental impact statement addresses the environmental, social and economic effects of the prohibitions, procedural, and Tongass alternatives. All proposed action alternatives would have positive environmental impacts including: protecting habitat for threatened and endangered species, protecting watersheds for public drinking water and aquatic habitat for fish, reducing the risk of invasive species, and protecting habitat for wildlife. Some of the key social and economic concerns are effects on public access, timber harvest, fire suppression, and fire hazard reduction.

Access

This proposal will not block access to national forests and grasslands. It will not close any existing authorized roads. 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. The roadless area rulemaking will also not block legal access to private or state land or affect other valid existing rights. All proposed alternatives would ensure that decisions about road closures and off highway vehicles would continue to be made at the local level.

The real threat to access on the national forests is our inability to maintain the existing transportation infrastructure--with a growing \$8.4 billion backlog. In fact, the agency loses more than 1000 miles of road a year to passenger car travel because it cannot afford to maintain them to safety and environmental standards. By not building controversial roads into roadless areas, the agency would be able to invest more in maintaining existing roads and improving access to the national forests and grasslands.

Timber Harvest Effects

Prohibiting road construction in inventoried roadless areas, except for those on the Tongass National Forest, is estimated to result in a 2 percent reduction in the proposed timber offered for harvest from national forest lands. If the Tongass National Forest is included, then there would be an estimated 5 percent reduction in the timber offered for harvest from national forest lands.

For the past 5 years less than 4 percent of the agency's timber harvest has been from inventoried roadless areas. Our data indicates less than 5 percent of our 5 year projected timber volume is dependent on road construction in inventoried roadless areas. In addition, eighty percent of our national forests estimate that less than 5 percent of their prospective timber volume is dependent on new road construction in inventoried roadless areas. Certainly, given their important values and the controversy generated, the quantity of timber coming from roadless areas in recent years has steadily declined.

Although conserving roadless areas is not likely to have significant national effects, there may be some adverse effects in certain local communities near national forests that plan significant road building in inventoried roadless areas. These effects are analyzed in the draft environmental impact

statement.

Fire Risk

The proposed rule would have no effect on our ability to suppress wildfires. In fact, using crews dropped from helicopters and airplanes, the Forest Service controls an estimated 98 percent of all fires in roadless areas while they are still considered small. Under this proposal, roads may continue to be built to suppress fire if there is an imminent threat to public health and safety. It is also unlikely that the proposed rule would affect the Forest Service's overall ability to treat National Forest System lands for forest health purposes given that most of these areas are already a low priority for fire hazard reduction.

The analysis in the DEIS indicates that the degree of overlap between areas that the agency has identified as having a high risk from wildfires and inventoried roadless areas is small, only 3 million acres of the estimated 24 million. Part of the reason can be attributed to many inventoried roadless areas being at higher elevations that are typically wetter and cooler, not adjacent to communities, and not influenced by past management activities. Many fire ecologists believe that unroaded areas have less potential for larger, higher intensity, more severe forest fires than roaded areas. This conclusion is based on several factors; fire suppression has been focused more in roaded than unroaded areas allowing more fuels to accumulate in the roaded areas. Also, in some areas, past logging practices have left many acres with additional dead and down woody material on the ground. Timber stands are generally more dense in roaded than unroaded areas, particularly in logged areas that have regenerated. These regenerated stands are often highly susceptible to forest fire damage.

The Forest Service initial fire risk mapping efforts identified up to 24 million acres of National Forest System land at high risk and 32 million acres at moderate risk. The priorities for treating these areas will be to focus on human communities at risk, species at risk, and watersheds at risk. In particular, priorities will focus on protection of life and property, usually not a problem for roadless areas, but rather more important for the wildland/urban interface where roads are more plentiful. It is important to note that at recent funding levels, the Forest Service has had only sufficient resources to treat 1.4 million acres per year to reduce wildfire risk. At this level of funding, it would take over 15 years to treat just the high risk areas in already roaded parts of the national forests.

SUMMARY

Thirty years of local planning efforts, wilderness debates, appeals, lawsuits, and injunctions have not solved the issue of long-term management of some 54 million acres of roadless areas in our National Forest System. As a result, the Forest Service is continuing the process to determine how the American people want these lands managed.

We believe the proposal provides a balanced approach to protect the national significance of roadless areas while also giving local managers the flexibility to consider the values of these areas in the larger context of multiple use management. It also carefully addresses issues that are important to the American people like fire, access, environmental effects and effects on communities. We look forward to hearing what the people have to say about the proposal and are actively seeking their input.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you and Members of the Committee may have.