

## **Roadless Area Conservation:**

### **An Investment For Future Generations**

**Mike Dombeck, Chief of the Forest Service**

January 5, 2001

More than a year ago, I sought and welcomed President Clinton and Secretary Glickman's assistance in protecting roadless areas of the National Forest System. Political affiliation made no difference to me – or to the land. Protecting wild and unfragmented landscapes is a bipartisan American tradition, one that rises above ideology. It is a uniquely American idea born of our uniquely American heritage. Europe has its great castles and works of art, Africa its ancient pyramids, and cultures. Here in America we have our wild places, the first home of Native Americans. These untamed landscapes are what remain of the pioneer spirit that shaped this nation's character.

Almost a century ago, President Theodore Roosevelt stood on the rim of the Grand Canyon and said, "Leave it as it is. The ages have been at work on it and man can only mar it." Much the same can be said about our remaining roadless areas. Since the first Forest Reserves were created in 1891, through 20 presidencies – 12 Republican and 8 Democrat – this great body of public land we celebrate today, a vital 58.5 million acres of our treasured National Forests and Grasslands, remain roadless. President Clinton's decision reaffirms the long-standing policy of his distinguished predecessors – that this great nation will keep some of its land the way the Lord created it.

In the past two centuries, this nation has chosen to use its natural resources to build its homes, feed its people, and defend its shores. At the same time, we have chosen to set aside the most extensive network of public lands, designated wilderness, monuments, parks, and refuges for wildlife and fish of any nation on earth. Conservation is nothing if not about choices left for future generations.

Today, we conclude a public process that is based on the direct input of more than 1.5 million people – but in a larger sense reflects the views of tens of millions of other Americans. The collective will of the American people has driven our decision to protect roadless areas.

The decision is based on sound science, and more than a year of analysis by some of the foremost researchers in their fields. But our decision also makes plain common sense. Consider:

- We are presently saddled with a maintenance backlog of about \$8.4 billion on our existing road system. Faced with such liabilities, no private landowner in the world would continue investing in new road construction.
- We presently supply less than 4 percent of the nation's timber from all of our national forestlands combined. Of that modest 4 percent, only a tiny fraction – 6 percent – will be affected by roadless area conservation. That's one-quarter of 1 percent. Similarly, National Forests supply less than 4 tenths of one percent of the nation's oil and gas, and far less from roadless areas.

Is it worth one-quarter of 1 percent of our nation's timber supply, or a fraction of a fraction of our oil and gas to protect 58.5 million acres of wild and unfragmented land in perpetuity? Seventy-five years ago, another Forest Service employee, Aldo Leopold, answered that question. "Such a policy would not subtract even a fraction of one per cent from our economic wealth, but would preserve a fraction of what has, since first the flight of years began, been wealth to the human spirit."

This is a conscious choice made with an eye toward the future. As we witness the march of urbanization and the development of wild places, we can take comfort in the knowledge that we have given at least some of our remaining undeveloped land – a piece of our pioneer heritage – lasting protection. Through that choice, we pay tribute to those who have come before and preserve their legacy for those who will follow.

Let me be clear. Roadless area conservation will in no way diminish our wildland firefighting capabilities, and it will

in no way affect existing permits, contracts, or rights of access. Moreover, I want to emphasize that timber harvest will continue in much of the National Forest System. This rule signifies a shift away from the timber controversies of the past that were typified by cutting old growth and developing roadless areas. Today, a growing consensus is building about the need to protect the most pristine forests while using timber harvest to make our other forests healthier, communities safer, and economies more resilient.

Roadless area conservation is a down payment on the well-being of future generations. Under this new rule, more than 58.5 million acres of roadless areas will continue to cleanse the water for downstream use by millions of Americans nationwide. They will continue to serve as a refuge for native plant and animal species and a bulwark against the spread of nonnative invasive species. As a baseline for natural habitats and ecosystems, they will continue to offer rare opportunities for study, research, and education. Finally, they will continue to offer terrific opportunities for hunting, fishing, and other dispersed forms of recreation on large, undisturbed landscapes where visitors can find privacy and solitude. As Aldo Leopold once put it, our remaining unroaded wildlands are a national treasure, a “wealth to the human spirit.”

This is a proud moment in Forest Service history. My heartfelt gratitude goes out to the hundreds of Forest Service employees who helped make this happen.