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Preserving Forests: No Backsliding

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President Clinton's order Friday preserving 60 million acres of roadless national forest from commercial exploitation is a welcome, overdue act. The protection covers about one-third of all land in the publicly owned forests, including the last of the best that has not been logged, mined or drilled. Much of the acreage was set aside years ago for consideration as wilderness but lost out in the political struggles over wilderness legislation.

Still, the battle for the roadless lands is only half won. Pro-development forces will fight Clinton's order in the courts, and conservatives in Congress vow to undo Clinton's land conservation actions. A spokesman for President-elect George W. Bush said Friday, after Clinton acted, that Bush will review "each and every one" of Clinton's final executive orders and appointments. More explicitly, in a Dec. 27 letter to Bush, House Resources Committee Chairman James V. Hansen (R-Utah) said he looked forward to working with him "to correct the misguided direction the Clinton administration has taken in their attempt to manage our natural resources."

Hansen attacked Clinton decisions on roadless forests, new national monuments, the banning of snowmobiles in Yellowstone and other national parks, and new protections for marine resource areas and fish and wildlife refuges. All of these, Hansen said, violate "the good stewardship of our public lands."

This is pro-development doublespeak reminiscent of the Ronald Reagan-James Watt era of land management. To them, stewardship meant turning the public lands over to private companies for exploitation and profit. But the public didn't buy that philosophy in the 1980s and it won't now.

Friday's landmark action, taken at the National Arboretum in Washington, establishes Clinton as an outstanding conservationist among American presidents, on a par with Jimmy Carter, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Theodore Roosevelt. But there is still more he can do before leaving office Jan. 20. Several areas deserve the protection Clinton can grant by declaring them national monuments. They include the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska and the Siskiyou Rivers region of coastal Oregon, one of the most diverse coniferous rain forests in the world.

From Jan. 20 on, it will be a defensive battle to protect the lands granted special protection during the past eight years. Development forces argue that such actions "lock up" the public lands and prevent proper "management" by the affected states. In fact, they save unspoiled lands as a legacy for this and future generations of Americans. These forests are for the use and enjoyment of all the people. They are no longer the province of the resource extractors and exploiters who have had their way far too long at the public's expense.