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Editorial

## Future of forests uncertain

By Denver Post Editorial Board

The Bush administration shouldn't discard science in the management for our national forests. Yet President Bush seems ready to return to the days when the U.S. Forest Service treated our wonderful woodlands like tree farms, by stalling a progressive Clinton-era order that placed priority on ecological balance.

These rules are separate from the Clinton administration's policy on national forest roadless areas. But they're even more important because they guide Forest Service decisions on all the national forests, not just the roadless areas.

Unlike some of its policies, the Clinton administration invested considerable time and thought to the now-delayed rules. The Clinton proposal updated regulations, written in 1976, that implement the National Forest Management Act, a good federal law that requires forest supervisors to weigh environmental, social, economic and other factors in their management plans. After a quarter of a century, the original rules were sorely out of date.

The Clinton-era rules were researched and written by a committee of more than a dozen scientists and other experts, including two Coloradans. Their proposal is rooted in fact: Forests are amazingly complex places, which provide us with an astounding array of benefits: lumber for our homes, water for our cities, habitat for our wildlife, and outdoor recreation to renew our souls.

But to function properly, forests must maintain an ecological balance. Therefore, federal management plans should focus on keeping that balance. Other considerations, including timber

cutting, should be secondary to that overarching goal, the Clinton rules said. The regulations didn't ban timber cutting or mineral exploration outside of wilderness areas, they just required more care when conducting such activities.

But two weeks before those rules went into effect, the Bush team suspended them, and instead gave timber cutting and other development star status. The Bush plan won't benefit Colorado and other Rocky Mountain states much, since our high altitudes and dry climate aren't conducive to large-scale timber cutting anyway. But it will delay and complicate efforts to revise management plans for the Pike, San Isabel, San Juan and other national forests. The future of Colorado's federal woodlands is thus, at best, now very uncertain.

Paradoxically, the Pacific Northwest could be hurt, too. Communities there mostly have overcome the initial panic at being told to stop clear-cutting old-growth forests. Sawmills re-tooled to use smaller diameter timber from more plentiful, younger trees. Tourism and new entrepreneurship - needing only fax lines and Internet connections - diversified the rural economy. So, the region's timber cutting today is vastly more sustainable than it was 20 years ago.

That long-term, win-win balance was what the experts who drafted the Clinton-era rules sought. But it's also the sensible approach the Bush team's latest environmental foray put at risk.