

EDITORIAL  
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## No turning back on roadless policy

*Although we'll be subjected to yet another round of review and debate, the Bush administration appears committed to the sound policy of protecting forest backcountry.*

Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman has shown a deft touch in her handling of a Forest Service rule protecting roadless areas. Her approach to this emotion-charged issue leaves us hopeful about the protection of wild lands and better stewardship of the forests.

Veneman said Friday the Bush administration will maintain the roadless policy approved by former President Clinton, but also will review the policy on a forest-by-forest basis and consider possible amendments.

Although we weary at just the thought of yet another round of review and debate over roadless areas, we're also confident that the fundamental policy of maintaining the integrity of national forest backcountry will be affirmed. It's the right thing to do for so many reasons, and the Bush administration should be commended for resisting pressure to abandon the policy.

The 58 million acres of national forests now classified as roadless are what remains in America after two centuries of the most intensive land development and resource extraction imaginable. These are the leftovers - the high, remote, rugged places always deemed too difficult, too expensive and too unproductive to develop. Left roadless because they were long considered worthless, many of these areas now have immeasurable value as wildlife habitat, watersheds, and recreation areas.

Protecting these areas from roads and logging still leaves two-thirds of the national forests

accessible via an extensive, albeit inadequately maintained network of roads. The bulk of the national forests remains open for logging. And remember, now, trees are a renewable resource. The timber industry doesn't - or shouldn't, anyway - need to constantly pioneer new logging areas.

Building roads into and developing roadless areas is a frightfully expensive, uneconomic undertaking. It costs more to build roads into these remote areas than the harvestable timber is worth; in many cases, roads and development cause problems for wildlife and other resources, requiring expensive and restrictive corrective measures. And, in fact, the Forest Service has in its long-range forest-management plans maintained a hands-off policy for these areas. Americans - and the land - are far better served by leaving the wild country pretty much alone and working to better manage the rest of the forests.

Although this policy is economically, environmentally and socially sound, the unusual, blanket nature of the roadless-protection rule as adopted by Clinton undoubtedly creates opportunities for fine-tuning. Although we'll have to wait and see what amendments the Forest Service proposes, we're certainly willing to consider adding or dropping specific sites from the list of protected areas, based on merits. Veneman says the government is committed to "protecting roadless values." If the Bush administration can perfect the policy, more power to it.