

Keep the Roadless Rule

THE BUSH administration is due to make clear this week whether it will protect the wild, roadless areas of the nation's forests. The Forest Service under President Clinton spent more than a year developing a plan to preserve those lands and holding public hearings about the proposal. Over the months the plan grew steadily stronger. Protected lands were expanded to include Alaska's Tongass National Forest, home of the world's largest intact temperate rain forest. Not only were new roads barred, but provisions were tightened to block logging that could have been carried out without carving roads.

The plan drew public support but also strong opposition from industry and some western officials, including Alaska's influential

senators, who objected to the loss of timber jobs in towns dependent on Tongass logging. The new administration pulled back the rules for review. If Mr. Bush weakens them, he will be making a mistake.

The roadless policy would focus resources on maintaining roads while protecting wildlife habitat and watershed quality. Those are important goals. Even more important is the recognition that managing the forests is about more than overseeing the extraction of resources, no matter how carefully. The rules drew a line and sent a message: Harvest and mine in areas already open, and save the remaining wild places for their own sake and for the future. If Mr. Bush erases that line or blurs it, he'll be sending a message too, one that will leave the country poorer in the long run.