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Conservation groups wary of forest policy proposal

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WASHINGTON - The Bush administration may drop a Clinton administration policy that would have given ecological considerations priority over economic and social activities in the country's 155 national forests.

Conservation groups criticized the idea, contained in proposed planning regulations for national forests circulated this week among Forest Service officials.

The draft rules would reduce the public's ability to comment on forest plans, eliminate safeguards for wildlife and drop the current requirement for environmental impact statements for new forest plans, environmentalists said. U.S. Forest Service spokeswoman Heidi Valetkevitch denied conservationists' claims that policies have already been changed.

'It's very, very preliminary at this stage,' she said.

She did acknowledge that one major change is possible. Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth had signaled previously that he favors a change to one key standard that had been proposed by the Clinton administration, Valetkevitch said.

Bosworth has proposed elevating social and economic sustainability to the same level as ecological sustainability in

future forest plans. In November, the Clinton administration issued a draft rule that emphasized ecological sustainability, a rule that conservationists applauded for giving top priority to forests' flora and fauna.

Conservationists fear that the new rules will allow foresters to give higher priority to economic issues, such as maintaining logging towns' economies or opening the forests to more recreational uses.

Bosworth wants to give the agency 'a common-sense rule' that will allow foresters to spend more time 'managing resources' and less time on planning, Valetkevitch said.

'The proposal effectively throws out two decades of environmental protections for America's national forests,' said Jane Danowitz, director of the Heritage Forests Campaign. 'Once again, the Bush administration has given its friends in the timber industry the final answer in determining the fate our national forests.'

Michael Francis, a Wilderness Society spokesman, said he feared that the new rules would return forest policy 'to the 1960s, where a little cadre of timber company officials and road planners took charge of forest policy. The public was just left out of the process.'

Josh Penry, a spokesman for Rep. Scott McInnis, R-Colo., chairman of the House Forests Subcommittee, said Forest Service officials had warned lawmakers that they were likely to hear complaints about the draft.