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## National Forests: Agency Calls For Public Input On Roads; Timber Directives

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As the Forest Service edges forward with recrafting the Clinton-era rules on forest management plans, forest roads and roadless areas, the agency is asking the public how it should handle these issues in the interim.

### ROADLESS

The Forest Service in Wednesday's Federal Register called for comments on an interim directive giving Chief Dale Bosworth temporary decision-making power over timber sales and road-building projects in roadless areas.

Bosworth assumed the authority on June 7 and said he would continue to make the decisions until forest management plans are revised to consider roadless area protection and the forests undergo a roads analysis.

Only 12 of 127 national forests have revised plans, including the largest national forest -- the Tongass at 17 million acres in Alaska, on which environmentalists have been keeping a sharp eye because of its many acres of roadless tracts. Even though a federal judge in that state sent the plan back to the Forest Service earlier this year to do a supplement environmental impact statement on changes made to the plan in 1999, the agency is considering it already revised, said Chris Risbrudt, acting associate deputy chief of the Forest Service.

Mike Anderson, senior resource analyst with the Wilderness Society, said he would like to have seen the chief-level review apply to the Tongass. "The biggest problem with this whole thing is it's not stopping the Forest Service from doing timber sales in the Tongass [roadless areas] or anywhere else, but there is this additional administrative hurdle here" that should include the Tongass, he said.

The original roadless rule, issued at the end of former President Clinton's term, would have halted roadbuilding and most logging in 58.5 million acres of roadless areas in federal forests. The Bush administration then delayed the rule to make changes to it, and a federal judge later suspended it. Comments on how the administration should change the roadless rule are due Sept. 10.

Philip Aune, vice president of public resources for the California Forestry Association, said the timber industry hopes decisions on roadless tracts stay at the local level when forest management plans are amended so that they are based on local conditions.

"The biggest threat to roadless areas is the threat of losses to wildfires," said Aune. He said areas are burned due to inactive management and logging firms had trouble even salvaging dead trees due to a reluctant agency under the Clinton administration and lawsuits brought mostly by environmental groups.

### ROADS

The Forest Service also printed a notice in Friday's Federal Register to collect public comments on another Bosworth interim directive that went into effect in May.

The agency's new transportation policy -- also called the roads rule -- initiated a science-based analysis for road construction and reconstruction. The rule contained a July 12 deadline for individual road projects to comply, but the directive extended that deadline to Jan. 12.

The directive also gives regional foresters the authority to grant exemptions for national forests to complete their forest-wide roads analyses, rather than having the chief do it.

Although the delay is meant to give forests more time to comply given their current work load, such as tracking road maintenance problems, the extension also gives the agency more time to make further changes to the roads rule.

For both the roadless and roads directives, the public has until the fourth week in October to comment.

### PLANNING REGULATIONS

The third major Clinton-era rule the Forest Service is working on changing governs how forest management plans are amended. Plans for each national forest are revised every 10-15 years.

The new planning regulations that went into effect Nov. 9, made ecological sustainability the primary focus of forest plans. But a task force under the current administration cited problems with placing ecological concerns over economic and social ones. Bosworth has also said the rule would be too difficult to implement.

A draft revised rule is expected in mid-to-late September, said Dave Barone, planning specialist for the Forest Service. Forest plans that are already undergoing changes under the 1982 rule or even the 2000 rule are allowed to continue, he said.

The 1982 rule allows for inventoried roadless areas to be evaluated for potential wilderness designation during the planning process, and that portion will likely remain the same, he said.