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Forest Service proposal for 'roadless areas' has environmentalists seeing red

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- The Forest Service is proposing to give its local managers more discretion to skip environmental analysis and public input for small logging and road-building projects in some of the most pristine national forests.

The agency is seeking public input on the proposal, which environmentalists say is further indication of the Bush administration's desire to roll back a Clinton-era banning logging and road building in a third of national forest lands.

"The Forest Service is changing the rules so that it doesn't have to do the environmental reviews" in some cases, said Mike Anderson, senior research analyst with the Wilderness Society.

Rhey Solomon, the Forest Service's assistant director for ecosystem management coordination, acknowledged the way the proposal is written gives some environmentalists cause to be upset.

"I would be the first to say that using the words we have used now, there may be some significant concerns," he said.

Solomon said the intent was to clarify conflicting court decisions to allow some limited projects to go forward without lengthy review, such as installing a rain gauge or collecting mushrooms in sensitive areas.

However, as written, the proposal also could give Forest Service officials discretion

to decide whether analysis or public comment is needed before allowing small timber sales, limited road construction, certain mining projects, off-road vehicle trails and other development in environmentally sensitive areas.

"It has some bad implications for roadless area protection," Anderson said. "What is going on is the Forest Service is making it easier for managers to do management activities in roadless areas and other environmentally sensitive areas by giving them greater discretion."

Roadless areas have been a controversial issue for the Bush administration, which promised revisions to the rule in May, arguing that all local interests hadn't provided input before Clinton adopted the rule just before leaving office. The administration officially reopened debate on the issue in July, asking the public 10 questions about the policy. The responses are being evaluated.

A timber industry representative was hoping that the latest proposal would lead to faster decision-making, particularly on projects to remove trees from dense forests to reduce wildfire risks.

"You've got to look at the consequences of not doing something, and those may be greater than the consequences of doing something minor," said Chris West, vice president of the American Forest Resource Council. "That's how the assessment needs to be done, especially in times where we've got so many areas at risk for catastrophic wildfire."

The Forest Service made the proposal in the Sept. 20 Federal Register. It is seeking public input until Nov. 19.