

**Pew Environment Group ♦ Sierra Club ♦ The Wilderness Society ♦ Earthjustice
Environment America ♦ Defenders of Wildlife ♦ Natural Resources Defense Council**

April 14, 2009

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

On behalf of our organizations and our members throughout the country, we want to offer our warmest congratulations on your appointment. We look forward to your tenure as Secretary of Agriculture. The resources and policies with which your department is charged are of pivotal importance to the nation, never more so than now. We know that, under your leadership, those responsibilities will be fulfilled with vision and commitment to the public good.

We write today on a matter of high importance to our groups and members concerning the management of our national forests. We urge you to take immediate action to preserve some of our last undeveloped national forestland. As the new administration decides how to move forward with its long-term conservation strategies and priorities, we encourage you to make certain these public lands are safeguarded in the interim.

As you know, President Barack Obama, like you, has been a supporter of the Roadless Area Conservation Rule, a popular and balanced conservation policy that preserves 58.5 million acres of inventoried roadless areas in America's national forests. In addition to his endorsement of this policy, as a Senator, he co-sponsored legislation (S. 1478) to codify the roadless rule into law.

The Roadless Area Conservation Rule was promulgated by the Clinton Administration on January 12, 2001, after the most extensive public involvement process in the history of federal rulemaking. However, during its tenure, the Bush Administration failed to defend it against legal challenges, and attempted to undo the rule by replacing it with a discretionary state petition process in 2005.

Presently, the status of the roadless rule is uncertain. Conflicting court decisions and injunctions have been issued for and against the rule by courts in California and Wyoming, and appeals are pending in the Ninth and Tenth Federal Circuits. Under the terms of the latest court decisions, the majority of the 58.5 million acres of inventoried roadless areas are at risk from logging, road building and other development prohibited by the rule.

Due to the aforementioned issues, we believe there is a critical need for administrative action within the Administration's first 100 days to ensure that national forest roadless areas – including those in the Tongass National Forest, where timber sales and logging roads authorized in roadless areas by the previous administration are impending – remain protected and are not inadvertently harmed in the short term until more permanent protections can be implemented. We specifically recommend that the U.S. Department of Agriculture issue a directive requiring Secretarial-level approval of any U.S. Forest Service projects that might be inconsistent with the roadless rule as adopted in January, 2001. There is precedent for the issuance of such an administrative directive as a similar approval process for roadless area activities was adopted by former U.S. Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth during 2001.

Such action is essential and would be consistent with President Obama's support for the roadless rule as well as the widespread backing the rule enjoys from the American people, Members of Congress, governors and other state and local leaders from both sides of the aisle. Additionally, an administrative directive would ensure that these public lands will not be threatened while the federal courts' conflicts are resolved and necessary steps are taken to fully reinstate the roadless rule and the protections it affords our last undeveloped national forestlands.

We are unanimous in our support for the Roadless Area Conservation Rule and look forward to working with you and the administration on a national approach to preserving these forest lands now and in the future.

Sincerely,

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cc: John Norris, Chief of Staff, Secretary Tom Vilsack
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