

March 24, 2009

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

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

Congratulations on your appointment and confirmation as Secretary of Agriculture. As a former Governor and lifelong resident of Oregon, a state with millions of acres of federal forests, I fully appreciate the value of special wildlands within these National Forests. Preserving these wildlands will help ensure that future generations can enjoy the places that Americans love to fish, hike and camp with our families. Therefore, I write today to urge you to implement an immediate "time-out" on road building and other activities that threaten these pristine wildlands.

Oregon is home to nearly two million acres of inventoried roadless areas. While these lands are valuable for their intrinsic and scenic value, they are also critical for the clean drinking water, fish and wildlife habitat, unique recreational opportunities, and economies they support. Additionally, our mature and old-growth forests act as carbon sinks and help to slow the impacts of climate change.

As you know, the Roadless Rule protects 58.5 million acres of America's roadless wildlands and was the result of the most extensive public involvement process in the history of federal rulemaking. Over half of our National Forests are already open to logging and road-building. The Roadless Rule is a balanced management tool that allows for the continued management of roadless areas against fire and disease, protecting public health and safety, while maintaining the access that Americans now enjoy.

During the last decade, over 4.2 million public comments have been submitted in support of protecting these special places. During the rulemaking process, on a per capita basis, residents of my state submitted more public comments than any other. Ninety-five percent of those comments were in favor of the strongest possible protections for roadless wildlands.

The Rule enjoys widespread support from hunters, anglers, conservation groups, the outdoor recreation industry, the general public, and elected leaders. Additionally, President Obama has been a strong supporter of the Roadless Rule. As a Senator, he cosponsored legislation to codify the Rule and, during his presidential campaign, pledged to uphold federal roadless protections.

Unfortunately, after years of repeated attempts by the Bush administration to undercut these protections and lawsuits brought by development interests, national management guidelines for our roadless wildlands are now unclear. Though Oregon's inventoried roadless areas are amongst the lands still legally protected under the rule, the majority of our country's most pristine National Forests are at risk from logging, mining, road building and other development due to conflicting court decisions.

Therefore, I encourage prompt administrative action to implement an immediate "time-out" on road-building and other commercial activities – with the exception of roadless activities designed solely to improve forest health -- on inventoried roadless areas in National Forests, including Alaska's Tongass National Forest. Specifically, I 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. Such action would be consistent with President Obama's support for the policy and ensure these wild areas are not harmed while we strive to gain permanent protections through implementation of the national Roadless Rule.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

John A. Kitzhaber, M.D.
Governor, State of Oregon
1995-2003