

Wildlands CPR _ Greater Yellowstone Coalition _ Native Forest Network _
Montana Chapter of the Sierra Club _ Montana Wilderness Association _
The Wilderness Society _ NRDC Wild Bears Project

Dale Bosworth
Chief, US Forest Service
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, D.C. 20250-0003

March 30, 2006

Dear Chief Bosworth,

We are writing to you concerning the future of Montana's last roadless forests and the benefits of these areas to the citizens of Montana, as well as to all Americans who share ownership of these national treasures. The roadless areas of our national forests not only provide all Montana citizens with high quality access to hunting, fishing and recreational opportunities, but also serve as a part of the economic foundation of our state. Watersheds in these areas are the very source of the clear, clean drinking and irrigation water that citizens in Montana and downstream states enjoy.

On May 5, 2005, the Department of Agriculture announced the adoption of a final rule requiring Governors to file petitions with the Forest Service in order to receive protections for roadless areas within their states above those afforded by the forest planning process.

According to the Rule, any such petition must be submitted to the Secretary of Agriculture not later than November 13, 2006. After the petition is submitted, it will be reviewed by a National Advisory Committee that will provide advice and recommendations to the Secretary on any subsequent State-specific rulemakings within 90 days.

If the petition is accepted, the Forest Service shall be directed to initiate notice and comment rulemaking to address the petition.

According to a statement by Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns concurrent with the issuance of the Rule, the rule would, "advance President Bush's commitment to cooperatively conserve inventoried roadless areas within our national forests."

Similarly, on September 6, 2005, Under Secretary of Agriculture Mark Rey stated, "we are providing interim protection to roadless areas, pending the development of state specific rules provided for in our 2005 rulemaking."

In recent months, representatives of the states of Washington, California, Oregon, Montana, Maine, and New Mexico have challenged the legality of the repeal of the 2001 Roadless Rule. The 2005 Rule has also been challenged in court by 20 conservation organizations.

On February 28th of this year, over a quarter of a million American's petitioned the Department of Agriculture, pursuant to the Administrative Procedures Act, to reinstate the 2001 rule. The act requires a prompt determination by the agency. The Act requires a prompt consideration and response to that petition.

The State of Montana is actively engaged, at great expense of both time and resources, in the development of a state petition consistent with the administration's revised rule. In light of this ongoing process, the legal cloud surrounding the new rule, and the unprecedented petition for reinstatement and consistent with the administration's commitment to provide "interim protection to roadless areas, pending the development of state specific rules," we ask that the Forest Service agree to not propose projects in inventoried roadless areas that might disqualify areas or portions of areas from protection, or degrade their roadless qualities, and to halt and withdraw all such projects under development (see attachment) for as long as the disposition of these areas remains unresolved.

Conserving Montana's pristine backcountry protects Montanans' right to hunt and fish and enjoy our great outdoors. In addition, these areas are imperative for providing clean water for our farms, ranches, and towns - while sustaining our world class fisheries and strong sources of economic growth— not just today but for generations to come.

Decisions regarding the management of these lands as roadless areas must be afforded significant consideration and weight. Moreover, decisions to take actions which may disqualify areas or portions of areas from protection, or degrade their roadless qualities and values should not be made while the state is reviewing its options for the conservation of these areas per the request of the Department of Agriculture, nor while legal issues surrounding the rule remain unresolved.

We look forward to your response.

Respectfully,

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