

October 9, 2000

The Honorable William J. Clinton  
President of the United States  
The White House  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We write to endorse strong protection for the remaining unroaded and undeveloped portions of national forests in the United States. As scientists working in natural-resource-related disciplines, we understand the enormous significance of your commitment to halting activities that degrade undeveloped national forest areas. We strongly agree with your conclusion that "these unspoiled places must be managed through science, not politics." In light of the irreplaceable functions these areas serve, it is wise to provide them as much protection from development as possible.

On May 9, the Forest Service released its proposal to implement your directive to protect roadless areas. While the Forest Service proposal to ban new roads into many roadless areas is a good start, it does not go nearly far enough to protect the biological integrity and watershed function of these important areas. Specifically, the Forest Service proposal is deficient in the following three areas: it fails to accord any protection whatsoever to the globally unique Tongass National Forest; it fails to prohibit logging and other destructive activities such as mining and oil development; and fails to accord any protection to smaller roadless areas that we believe have a great deal of importance to terrestrial and aquatic species.

Research documents the crucial ecological role of unroaded and undeveloped areas, quite apart from their aesthetic and recreational values to the public. As the landscapes least altered by human activity, they are generally our most healthy and resilient ecosystems, an increasingly important factor as global warming stresses natural systems. They have intact soil resources and low susceptibility to introduced tree diseases and insect attacks, compared to roaded and logged areas. Without road access, they also have suffered less from the adverse effects of fire suppression. These characteristics make them essential as benchmarks for research on ecological processes and as controls for management agency experiments in the restoration of degraded ecosystems on other federal lands.

These same factors, combined with an absence of habitat fragmentation and low levels of invasive, non-native species, make roadless areas refuges for sensitive wildlife and plant species, many of which are increasingly at risk in more developed settings. They contribute to the continued viability of numerous species, and may help avert the need to list some of them -- including some found on private as well as public lands -- as threatened or endangered. These characteristics also mean that roadless areas serve as important genetic reservoirs for the future.

Additionally, undeveloped areas have been spared the increased erosion associated with roadbuilding, logging, and other forms of development, which causes damaging sedimentation of streams and rivers. These roadless areas therefore harbor some of the

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country's most intact aquatic ecosystems, and play a critical role in efforts to bring about the recovery of imperiled stocks of salmon and other fish. The clean flows they provide are important not only to aquatic organisms, but also as sources of drinking water (42 million acres of national forest land are classified as municipal watersheds). And particularly where forested, these areas help regulate stream flows and reduce flood threats, absorbing excess waters during storm events and releasing them slowly over time.

Preserving these qualities and ecological services is in large measure a function of how pristine we are able to keep our undeveloped areas. Maintaining their roadless character is one essential step in that pursuit -- the direct ecological impacts of roads are well documented. Research also shows that most forms of logging and other forms of development can alter the natural character of the landscape and its ecological functioning at least as profoundly as roads. Because of this, your final decision should disallow all extractive development explicitly. Relying on a road ban alone would leave a loophole seriously compromising your enormously promising initiative.

We also urge you to protect unroaded areas in the few places where they are relatively abundant, as rigorously as in the many regions where they have become quite scarce. The Tongass National Forest of southeast Alaska, for instance, in the largest remaining temperate rainforest in the world and endowed with many more roadless acres than any other national forest, is unique from an ecological perspective. Diminishing the Tongass, or similarly undeveloped forest landscapes, will mean an irreplaceable loss of biological resources.

In some parts of the United States, particularly but by no means exclusively in the eastern half of the country, large roadless areas are scarce. Areas under 5,000 acres, however, still make valuable contributions to ecological functions and services, providing, for example, some of the best available habitat for interior forest dwelling or disturbance-averse wildlife. It would be prudent, therefore, to extend protection to smaller roadless areas in your final decision, including those with fewer than 5,000 acres.

We applaud your forward-thinking and extremely significant initiative, and urge you to make it both strong and comprehensive by significantly improving on the Forest Service proposal laid out in its May 9 proposal. Specifically, the final policy must protect roadless areas from not just roads, but other development, must accord protection to the Tongass National Forest, and provide protection to smaller roadless areas. As scientists we are acutely aware of how such an initiative, if done right, will make an extraordinary difference to the country's long term well-being.

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