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Economic and Environmental Impacts of Proposed Changes to the Roadless Rule in Colorado

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Introduction

The Roadless Area Conservation Rule protects 4,433,000 acres of national forests in Colorado. The rule was established after the most extensive public input on any Federal rule-making process in history. More than 28,000 Coloradans commented on the Roadless Area Conservation Rule before it was finalized, and more than 90 percent supported full protection. Despite overwhelming public support for these protections, the Bush administration has proposed to change the rule and potentially open protected public lands for industrial activity and the building of new roads.

Right now the U.S. Forest Service is accepting public comments before making a final decision to accept or reject these proposed changes. This comment period ends on September 14th 2004. Coloradans have less than 2 weeks to voice their opinion on the future of national forests in the state.

If the proposed rule changes are accepted there will be huge impacts that will negatively affect local economy, increase the likelihood of wildfires and decrease quality of life. This report outlines how the repeal of the roadless rule will affect Colorado in all of these ways.

BASIC STATISTICS

- National forests in Colorado encompass 13.9 million acres—20 percent of the state's land base (approx. 66.3 million acres).
- More than 4.4 million acres are inventoried roadless areas—about six percent of the state's land base.

Economic Factors

- According to *Economic Values of Protecting Roadless Areas in the United States*, Colorado receives nearly \$60 million from its 4.4 million acres of roadless areas each yearⁱ.
- The Colorado Division of Wildlife published a report stating that fishing and hunting alone contribute \$1.5 billion annually to Colorado's economyⁱⁱ, while other sources indicate that logging and wood products industries contribute less than 0.2% to the state's pool of jobsⁱⁱⁱ.
- Each year, Coloradans estimate spending approximately \$200 million on recreation equipment and gear alone^{iv}.
- In 2001, tourists spent \$7 billion in Colorado - \$1 billion of which was spent directly on recreation^v.
- The Forest Service's own statistics demonstrate that extractive industries on Forest Service lands generated \$9 billion in 1999 and 153,000 jobs, while conservation activities (wilderness, recreation and the protection of endangered species) generated \$27 billion and 669,000 jobs nationally^{vi}.
- The US Forest Services currently struggles to maintain and manage existing roads because of a fiscal backlog of \$8.4 billion on road maintenance^{vii}.

WILDFIRE

- Areas that already have roads face a higher potential for catastrophic wildfire from human causes^{viii}.
- Roads are associated with increased fire starts,^{ix} because logging companies often harvest the largest trees – the ones most able to survive fires.
- Roadless areas tend to be far from communities and have lower fire risks than roaded forests.
- Logging in roadless areas could increase fire risk by drying out fuels and providing more access and therefore more human-caused fires.

Recreation

- Roadless areas in Colorado provide outdoor recreation opportunities and tourism, which greatly benefits our state's economy. These remaining roadless areas are unspoiled by large-scale human development. They provide tranquil escapes from the hustle and bustle from our daily lives and draw visitors to Colorado.
- Eighty-two million Americans 16 years or older, or 43 percent of the adult population enjoyed some form of wildlife-related recreation during 2001. In doing so, they pumped \$108 billion into the national economy (1.1% of GDP), supporting hundreds of thousands of jobs^x. This does not include the economic benefits of wildly popular pursuits such as hiking, backcountry skiing, biking, and horseback riding.
- More than 2.5 million Coloradoans participate in some sort of outdoor recreation every year^{xi}.
- The Rule would not limit public access to roadless lands for recreation nor would it close any existing roads.
- The rule does not bar off-road vehicles (ORV) from protected areas, but leaves the matter to local regulation^{xii}.
- Access routes designated and managed as trails by a local national forest are not considered roads and therefore can be maintained by the forest service^{xiii}.

Wildlife

- Roadless areas nationwide support more than 280 threatened, endangered, proposed, or sensitive species such as the boreal toad and lynx.
- Roadless areas in Colorado provide important habitat for wildlife, such as elk and trout.
- More than 400 scientists, including researchers at Colorado State University have endorsed protection of all roadless areas from road building, commercial logging,

and mineral development, citing their critical importance for recovery of salmon and other fish, among other values.

What would happen if the Roadless Rule were repealed?

- On July 16th, 2004, the Bush Administration officially announced proposed changes to the Roadless Area Conservation Rule that began the sixty-day comment period. The proposed changes removes roadless area protections in our treasured national forests unless governors proactively petition the USDA Secretary within 18 months following the effective date of the final rule to block road-building and commercial timber harvesting for all or any portion of inventoried roadless areas within their respective state.
- This state petitioning process guarantees no assurances that roadless protections will ever happen because Forest Service will be able to veto governors' petitions. If the Secretary accepts the petition, the Forest Service will initiate subsequent State-specific rulemaking for the management of the roadless areas
- These proposed changes, basically, guts the most favorable forest conservation regulation, creates substantial red tape, promotes inconsistency in roadless area protection and opens our remote areas of treasured Colorado's forests to big dollar commercial interests.

Local Forest Planning

- National forest planning at the local level has resulted in the destruction of 2.8 million acres of roadless areas nationwide during the past 20 years.
- In Colorado, local forest plans now in effect allow for road construction on nearly 80 percent of the state's remaining roadless acreage.
- Even recently updated forest plans for the Arapaho-Roosevelt, Rio Grande, and Routt NFs leave more than 500,000 acres of roadless areas open to road construction.

PUBLIC OPINION

- A strong majority of voters—67 percent—favor roadless areas protection, according to a Mellman Group poll (2001). Sixty-four percent of Westerners are supportive.
- More than 75 percent of Colorado voters believe that roadless areas should be spared development, according to the Denver-based Ridder-Braden polling firm (2000).
- The Republican polling firm American Viewpoint found that 62 percent of Republicans and two-thirds of those in the West agreed that roadless areas should be protected.

CONCLUSION

The Roadless Area Conservation Rule as issued in January 2001 makes ecological and economic sense for Colorado. In Colorado's forests, there are already enough roads to go from the Kansas border to Utah and back 17 times. Failure to maintain the existing road system directly produces erosion, impacts water quality, and public safety concerns in Colorado. Due to environmental, economic and fire safety concerns outlined above as well as the overwhelming public support for roadless protections, The Bush administration should drop their proposal to repeal the Roadless Area Conservation Rule and work to protect these areas for future generations.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- About the roadless rule and agency rulemaking process, visit the Forest Service's website, www.roadless.fs.fed.us
- About efforts to protect roadless areas in Colorado, contact Jake Schlesinger, Forest Preservation Associate at Environment Colorado (303) 573-0610 ext. 310

ⁱ Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics. 2000. "Economic Values of Protecting Roadless Areas in The United States"

ⁱⁱ Colorado Division of Wildlife. 2004. "Economic Impacts of Hunting, Fishing and Wildlife Watching in Colorado."

ⁱⁱⁱ Colorado Employment and Wages, ES202, Annual Averages 2002. Department of Labor and Employment, Division of Employment and Training, Labor Market Information Sector. http://www.coworkforce.com/lmi/es202/2002PDF/2002_All.pdf

^{iv} Outdoor Industry Association. "State by State Participation Study"
http://www.outdoorindustry.org/State_by_State_Study.pdf

^v Colorado Tourism Office. 2001. "Longwoods Colorado Visitor Study"

^{vi} Source: Alward, G. S., J. R. Arnold, M. J. Niccolucci, and S. A. Winter. 2003. Evaluating the economic significance of the USDA Forest Service strategic plan (2000 revision): Methods and results for programmatic evaluations. Fort Collins, CO: USDA Forest Service Inventory and Monitoring Report No. 6. 45 p.

^{vii} 66 Federal Register, P. 3243

^{viii} Thomas M. Power, Chairman Economics Department, University of Montana

^{ix} 66 Federal Register, P.3253

^x US Fish and Wildlife Service. 2002. "National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation."

^{xi} Outdoor Industry Association. "State by State Participation Study"
http://www.outdoorindustry.org/State_by_State_Study.pdf

^{xii} 36 CFR § 294.11, definition of "unclassified road."

^{xiii} USDA Forest Service "Roadless Area Conservation" <http://www.roadless.fs.fed.us>