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Paul Fish: Keep backcountry roadless area protections throughout the West

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By Paul Fish
Mountain Gear

You may never have heard of the Roadless Rule, but it has quietly protected some of our last best remaining ancient forests, pristine watersheds and opportunities for world class recreation for nearly two decades.

The Roadless Rule was established in 2001 after two years of public process including 600 public meetings around the country and more than 1 million public comments. At its core, the Roadless Rule is a balanced public policy that protects nearly 60 million acres of unloaded and undeveloped backcountry forest and streams on U.S. Forest Service lands.

The rule prohibits building new roads or related timber harvest on these roadless areas, but they are still open for a range of recreational activities, including climbing, hiking, mountain biking, paddling, horseback riding and backcountry skiing. While these areas are protected from new development, they are less restrictive than designated wilderness areas in terms of what you can do there. The Roadless Rule provides protections for about a third of our national forests, leaving half of our national forests open to multiple-use development like mining, logging and timber harvest.

These areas are more than reserved for recreation. More than 60 million Americans rely on clean drinking water from national forests. Roadless areas provide the purest source of water due to their pristine and road-free condition. Roadless areas are the best habitat for hundreds of threatened, endangered and declining species. Roadless

protections also make good economic sense by saving taxpayers' dollars on the cost of adding new roads to the already unaffordable network of nearly 375,000 miles of national forest roads, which have an unfunded maintenance backlog of nearly \$8 billion.

However, right now these important protections are under attack. The U.S. Forest Service is currently seeking comment on a proposal to eliminate all roadless areas in the nation's largest national forest – the Tongass National Forest in Alaska. While Alaska is the first target for repealing these hard-fought protections, it will not be the last.

Though you might not know it, the Roadless Rule has been instrumental in protecting outdoor recreation experiences across the country. Here in Washington state nearly 2 million acres of pristine forests and intact watersheds provide a stunning backdrop for recreation including much of the Kettle Crest here in the Columbia Highlands.

As a local gear store that outfits individuals with equipment to explore the great outdoors, Mountain Gear recommends these areas to our customers for hiking, biking, camping, hunting, fishing and other recreational activities in our nearby Colville, Panhandle and Kaniksu national forests.

Mountain Gear's nearly 50 employees and thousands of customers are just the tip of the iceberg in a sustainable and growing national recreational economy. The recreational uses and values of roadless areas and other public lands serve as a key foundation. According to a 2017 study conducted by the Outdoor Industry Association, in Washington state alone our industry generates \$26 billion in annual consumer spending, creates 200,000 jobs, and brings in \$2.3 billion in state and local tax revenue. Public land policies like the Roadless Rule are essential to the economic benefits to local businesses and local communities like Spokane.

Roadless areas and the streams, forests and backcountry landscapes they protect are integral to the quality of life we all enjoy here in Eastern Washington. It is imperative that we pass on this legacy to those who follow us. Join me in defending our roadless areas for clean water, wildlife habitat and backcountry recreation.

Paul Fish is owner of Mountain Gear, located in Spokane Valley and outfitting locals with what they need to explore the outdoors since 1983.

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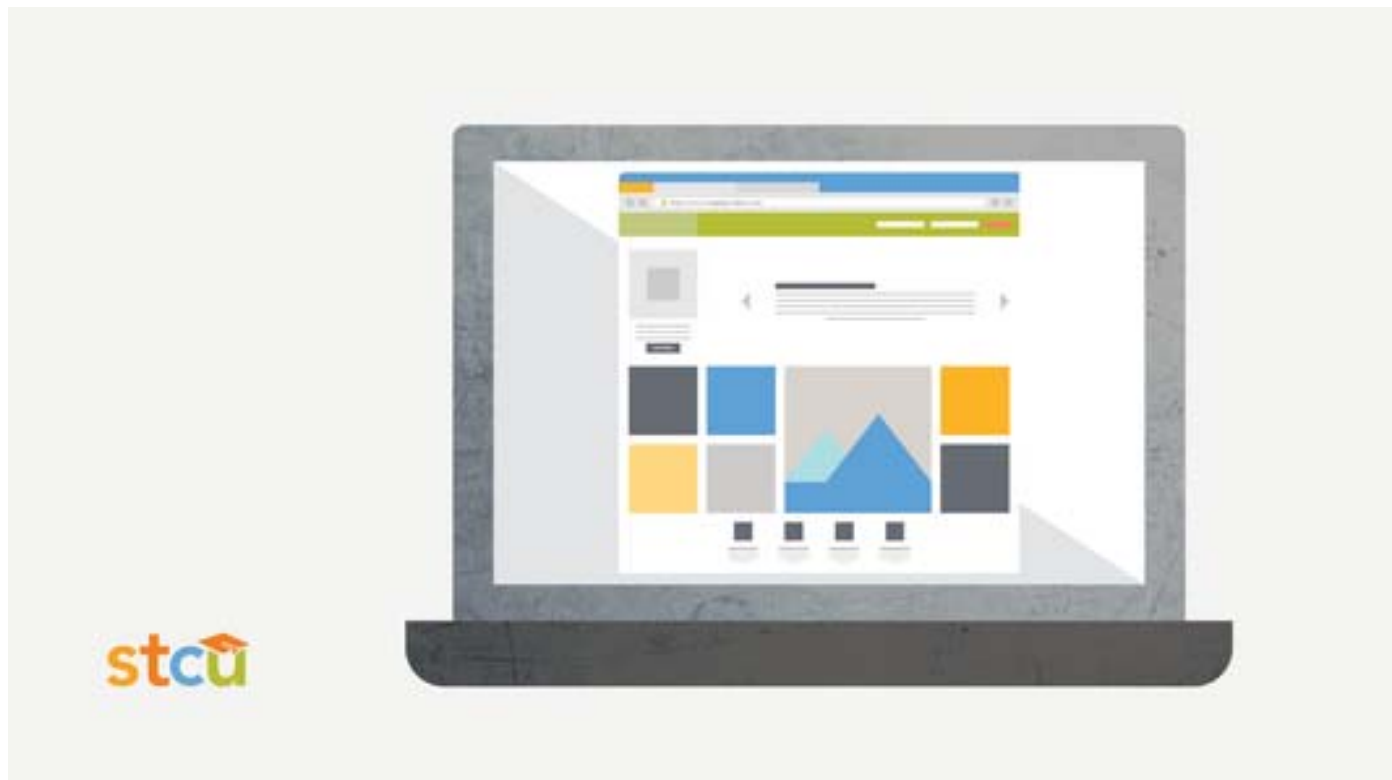
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