

"Further, the Forest Service is developing a scientifically based policy for managing roadless areas in our national forests. These last remaining wild areas are precious to millions of Americans and key to protecting clean water and abundant wildlife habitat, and providing recreation opportunities. These unspoiled places must be managed through science, not politics."

--William J. Clinton
November 14, 1997

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

December 10, 1997

Dear Mr. President:

In mid-November, you announced that the Forest Service is in the process of developing a scientifically based policy for managing roadless areas in the national forests. As scientists with many years of professional experience in biological conservation, we are writing to commend you for your leadership on this important matter and to offer some thoughts on the state of knowledge regarding the ecological values associated with roadless areas.

A substantial amount of scientific information collected from both aquatic and terrestrial environments has demonstrated the importance of roadless areas in protecting the nation's wildlife, fisheries, and water resources. Roadless areas are critical because they represent the least human-disturbed habitats in an almost universally disturbed landscape. As such, they act as de facto refuges for numerous sensitive plant and animal species, reservoirs of genetic material, and benchmarks for experimental restoration efforts in intensively managed landscapes. Streams flowing out of roadless areas typically provide supplies of the purest water, untainted by chemical pollutants and within the cool temperature range required by many native fish species. In addition, most roadless areas are dominated by steep slopes, high elevations, and unstable or highly erosive soils. The ecological risks associated with developing these areas are extremely high, and may jeopardize the flow of goods and services that the national forests currently provide to human society.

Regional ecosystem assessments completed for the Pacific Northwest (USDA et. al. 1993), the Sierra Nevada (SNEP 1996), eastern Washington and Oregon (Henjum et al. 1994) and the Interior Columbia Basin (Quigley et al. 1996) highlight the significance of roadless areas in maintaining the integrity of ecosystems on federal lands. These and other studies describe the extensive environmental damage caused by roads, road construction, and other development. Roads fragment wildlife habitat, alter the hydrological processes of watersheds, discharge excessive sediment to streams, increase disturbance to forest animals, make fish and wildlife vulnerable to excessive harvest, and facilitate the spread of alien species. In the Pacific Northwest, roads have also been implicated as a major cause of environmentally destructive and life-threatening landslides. Protection of roadless areas alone will not secure the conservation

of biodiversity on the nation's federal lands, but we believe it would be a major step forward.

To date, the Forest Service has considered roadless areas only in terms of their value for primitive and semi-primitive recreation opportunities. In the late 1970s, roadless areas greater than 5,000 acres in size and those immediately adjacent to designated wilderness and national parks were identified through the Roadless Area Review and Evaluation process (i.e. RARE I and RARE II). A small proportion of these inventoried roadless areas have since been designated as official wilderness, but the vast majority remain unprotected under existing forest plans. While protecting inventoried roadless areas will contribute to overall conservation objectives, we believe that roadless areas smaller than the arbitrary 5,000 acre criteria are biologically significant and should also be considered as part of your forthcoming roadless area policy.

There is a growing consensus among academic and agency scientists that existing roadless areas – irrespective of size – contribute substantially to maintaining biodiversity and ecological integrity on the national forests. The Eastside Forests Scientific Societies Panel, including representatives from the American Fisheries Society, American Ornithologists' Union, Ecological Society of America, Society for Conservation Biology, and The Wildlife Society, recommended a prohibition on the construction of new roads and logging within existing (1) roadless regions larger than 1,000 acres, and (2) roadless regions smaller than 1,000 acres that are biologically significant (Henjum et. al. 1994). Other scientists have also recommended protection of all roadless areas greater than 1,000 acres, at least until landscapes degraded by past management have recovered (e.g., Rhodes et al. 1994).

As you have acknowledged, a national policy prohibiting road building and other forms of development in roadless areas represents a major step towards balancing sustainable forest management with conserving environmental values on federal lands. In our view, a scientifically-based policy for roadless areas on public lands should, at a minimum, protect from development all roadless areas larger than 1,000 acres and those smaller areas that have special ecological significance because of their contributions to regional landscapes.

Sincerely yours,

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