

**Statement of  
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**Before the  
U. S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on Forests and Public Land Management**

**Regarding the Forest Service's Proposed Road Management Policy  
May 16, 2000**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Forest Service's proposed road management policy. We designed this policy to help us make the Forest Service road system safe, responsive to public and agency needs, environmentally sound, affordable, and efficient to manage.

**INTRODUCTION**

With more than 380,000 miles of roads within the National Forest System, enough to circle the globe more than 15 times, the Forest Service is challenged to provide safe and efficient public access without degrading land health and water quality.

The proposed road management policy, announced on March 3, 2000 emphasizes the need for the Forest Service to:

- 1) Complete extensive analysis and public involvement at the local level in order to establish a forest road system that serves resource objectives and public uses of national forest lands as identified in forest plans.

2) Consider more carefully proposals to build roads. Decisions to build new roads will consider the availability of funding for maintenance and operation over the long-term. Decisions will also be based on the latest scientific information on the effects of roads on ecosystems.

3) Maintain and upgrade the most heavily-used roads in order to provide safe travel and reduce adverse environmental impacts.

4) Decommission or convert to other uses unneeded and environmentally damaging roads after analysis and full public involvement.

This rule does not propose to construct or close specific roads. Rather, it establishes a scientific and public process for such decisions to be made at the local level.

## **BACKGROUND**

Few natural resource issues in recent years have attracted as much public scrutiny as the management of the Forest Service road system. Forest roads, especially if poorly maintained, can have adverse impacts on watersheds. Few marks on the land are more lasting than roads. Yet, forest roads are essential for forest use and often serve as the backbone of rural transportation networks.

The estimated 380,000 miles of classified Forest Service roads on National Forest System lands are extensive and diverse. In addition, there are at least 60,000 miles of unclassified roads. These include temporary roads and roads that were never planned, built, and maintained to safety, service, and environmental standards.

Most of the existing road system was built over the last 50 years for timber harvest and log removal. In the decades after World War II, logging traffic tripled, peaking in 1990. But when timber harvests on the national forests declined in the 1990's, logging traffic fell to 1950's level. By contrast, recreation use of forest roads has grown to 13 times the 1950 rate.

Approximately one-fourth of all Forest Service roads serve passenger car use. Over one-half are passable by high-clearance vehicles. Managers today must wrestle with

many complicated forest road issues. Along with the positive benefits of the agency's road system, negative effects on the landscape from constructing roads and deferring maintenance are also well documented. Roads fragment and degrade habitat for wildlife species and eliminate travel corridors for other species. Poorly located, designed, or maintained roads promote erosion and landslides and degrade riparian and wetland habitat.

In addition, many roads on the national forests do not meet current standards for safety and environmental protection. Many of these are classified roads that have not been properly maintained for a variety of reasons. Some were planned for temporary access but never closed. Others evolved from tracks made by off-road vehicles. Due to their haphazard nature, unclassified roads have far more adverse impacts on the environment than do permanent, properly planned forest roads that are better engineered and maintained.

For many years, the Forest Service viewed the road system on the national forests as an asset--providing access for logging, forest management, recreation, resource protection, and other uses of the national forests and grasslands. But, in recent years, it has become clear that this asset is quickly becoming a liability as a result of a failure to keep up with road system maintenance needs.

A recent assessment of national forest road maintenance and reconstruction needs indicated that \$8.4 billion would be required to clean up the backlog of road related problems that exist on the landscape. And, the problem continues to grow. Despite recent increases in funding for National Forest System road maintenance, the Forest Service still only receives sufficient funds to maintain less than 20 percent of the arterial and collector road system--accounting for 84 percent of national forest road system use but only 16 percent of the total miles on national forest roads.

Mr. Chairman, no business could afford to allow its capital assets to deteriorate at such an alarming rate. As interest in use of the national forests grows, particularly as a result of growing demand for recreation and tourism, access needs will also increase. Yet, at current funding levels, over 1100 miles of road access are lost each year, simply the result of benign neglect.

This is one important reason for our shift in focus from building new roads into roadless areas to maintaining the road system that currently exists. Failure to

reinvest in our existing rural transportation network will affect public safety and access, rural communities and their economies, and environmental quality. Yet, this reinvestment could spur new investments in rural economies and produce thousands of new jobs associated with the repair and maintenance of this failing transportation infrastructure.

## **OVERVIEW OF THE PROPOSED POLICY**

The proposed road management policy requires the use of a scientific roads analysis process at the local level and incorporates public involvement to assist land managers in making more informed decisions about roads. The science-based road analysis procedure will strongly encourage public participation in a dialogue about road management options and will provide land managers with access alternatives.

The road analysis process will describe the existing road system on an individual national forest or grassland in relation to current forest plan direction, identify issues, and assess benefits, problems, and risks. The analysis will also describe management opportunities and help establish priorities. It will include maps and supporting information important for making decisions about future characteristics of the road system.

The road analysis neither makes decisions nor allocates lands for specific purposes. Rather, the new science-based road analysis identifies and addresses a set of possible issues and applicable analysis questions that, when answered, produce information about maintenance needs and possible road construction, reconstruction, and decommissioning opportunities that decision makers can consider.

The proposal also requires each national forest and grassland to complete and maintain a transportation atlas identifying the transportation infrastructure needed for management and public access based on the road analysis. The atlas would replace transportation plans currently required by the Forest Service manual.

Enhanced analysis and scientific review of the road system are expected to improve understanding of the trade-offs involved with the transportation system and produce more informed decision-making and improved public benefits.

## **Transition Procedures**

We recognize that it will take some time for all forests to complete their science-based road analysis and integrate it into their forest plan. The proposed policy provides transitional procedures that allow for routine and emergency maintenance on classified roads to continue. It also allows for the completion of road construction and reconstruction that is currently proposed in roaded portions of the national forests.

Until a roads analysis has been integrated into a forest plan through revision or amendment, or until the Regional Forester determines the existing forest plan is consistent with the transportation analysis, decisions on reconstruction and construction of new roads in inventoried roadless areas and other unroaded areas will require the decision maker to demonstrate a compelling need to build a road. Compelling needs include, but are not limited to, public safety, critical resource restoration and protection, and access provided by statute, treaty, or pursuant to reserved or outstanding rights. In roadless areas, an environmental impact statement must be prepared and a record of decision must be signed by the Regional Forester before a road can be built.

## **PUBLIC COMMENT**

The Forest Service published the proposed road management policy on March 3, 2000, giving the public 60 days to comment on the policy. The agency subsequently extended the comment period for an additional 15 days to May 17, 2000. During this time, we invite and encourage comments on the proposed rule. In addition, many Forests have held meetings to provide additional opportunities for local comment and to answer questions on this proposed rulemaking. We will carefully consider the comments in developing a final policy, which we plan to complete in September 2000.

Previously, the Forest Service has provided many opportunities for the public to comment on the development of this proposed policy. The agency announced its intent to revise regulations concerning the management of the national forest transportation system in January 1998. Simultaneously, the agency published a

proposed interim rule to temporarily suspend temporary and permanent road construction and reconstruction in certain unroaded areas of National Forest System lands. In addition, public meetings were held in 31 communities nationwide in February and March 1998 on this transportation system.

After considering the comments, in February 1999 the Forest Service issued the final interim roads rule temporarily suspending road construction and reconstruction in unroaded areas for 18 months or until a new transportation rule is promulgated, whichever comes first. The purpose of the interim rule was to take a timeout for 18 months while the Forest Service developed a revised forest road transportation policy and analytical tools to provide a more ecological approach to existing and future road needs.

The Forest Service has developed this proposed policy using the information from the comments received on both the proposed rulemaking and the interim rule.

## **CONCLUSION**

The proposed road management policy will seek to ensure that future road construction, reconstruction, maintenance and decommissioning decisions are based upon (1) the best available science and (2) early, informed, and frequent public dialogue. Our objective is to ensure that the appropriate level and kind of access to the national forests and grasslands are provided so that public and management needs are met, the transportation system can be maintained, and the natural resources we are entrusted to manage are not impaired.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you or other Members of the Committee may have.

