

The Future of Recreation on Your National Forests and Grasslands

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It's a pleasure to be here today to speak to you again this year. In particular, I'd like to thank Bill Monroe for inviting me, and Eileen King for making the arrangements. I commend OWAA for providing this opportunity for a dialogue about the responsible use of our natural resources. For anyone interested, I will be available to meet for questions later on today.

Our topic today is timely—the future of recreation on public lands. It's timely because recreation has been growing by leaps and bounds on our public lands. Consider:

- In 1946, our national forests and grasslands hosted just 18 million visitor-days; last year, we hosted nearly 1 billion—that's 50 times more.
- In 1996, on any given day, we had about 15,000 logging vehicles on our forest roads. 15,000 in a single day is a lot. But on any given day, we also had over 1.7 million recreational vehicles. 1.7 million—that's over 100 times more!

Last year, our national forests and grasslands contributed about \$134 billion to our gross national product, mostly from recreation. That's why recreation is a major focal area for the Forest Service.

Our Natural Resource Agenda for the 21st century has four overarching priorities:

- Ecologically sustainable forest and grassland management;
- Watershed health and restoration;
- Recreation; and
- Forest roads and roadless areas.

These four priorities are intrinsic to our core mission of caring for the land and serving people.

Our First Priority: Living Within the Limits of the Land

The Forest Service will not allow the health of your national forests and grasslands to be compromised. If there's one message I want you to leave with today, it's this: Living within the limits of the land must be our first and highest priority. We owe it to the legacy of Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot, the visionaries who made "the greatest good of the greatest number" the guiding principle for the National Forest System. We can fulfill our mission of serving the American people—of providing the greatest good for the greatest number—only if we first care for the land.

With that, I'd like to talk about two issues:

- First, our roads and roadless policies. A lot has been said about our approach to managing forest roads, especially our roadless conservation efforts. Roadless area conservation will protect the health of the land. And it will improve, not take away from, existing recreation opportunities on public lands.
- Second, our recreation policy. The single objective that unites our approach to roads, roadless areas, and recreation is that we are seeking to assure the American people access to the lands they so love in a manner that conserves the long-term health of the land.

Roads and Recreation

We need our forest roads. People need a sound road system to reach their favorite outdoor spots. Forest roads provide the backbone of many rural transportation systems. Our local communities need recreational use to support local transportation, access for multiple use management, and jobs. Just as importantly, we need our roads so we can treat and restore our watersheds and ecosystems. Make no mistake, we need our forest roads.

Our roads policy is about working together with local communities, communities of interest and communities of place, to focus on the road system of the future—rather than fighting over the crumbling road system of the past.

Today, however, our road system is nearly complete. We have some 380,000 miles of forest roads—enough to circle the Earth about 15 times. Most roads were built for logging; but today, we harvest about a quarter of the timber that we took from our national forests in the 1980s. We are left with a road system that was designed primarily for a use that has diminished by about 75 percent. The result is that we can't afford to maintain all the roads we have. Consider:

- In 1980, our funding for roads was \$600 million. Today, it is less than \$200 million.
- Today, we receive only about 20 percent of the funding we need for the roads we have.
- Our funding backlog for roads is \$8.4 billion. That's more than twice the Forest Service's entire annual budget!

In fact, our inability to stem the deterioration of our road system can cause landslides and soil erosion. It's a major factor in the loss of public access.

To meet the challenge, we have made it our goal to establish a sound system of forest roads that meet safety and environmental standards while serving our multiple use needs. We can do that in two ways. First, we must seek new sources of funding to maintain the roads we need. Second, we need to use the best science to help inform local decisions about which roads should be decommissioned, or converted to other uses. That is the purpose of the roads policy.

And that brings me to roadless area conservation. There's an old saying: "If you're in a hole, stop digging." We're in a hole, so we stopped digging. We stopped building new forest roads we can't afford into areas that don't need them.

For three decades, we tried to resolve the issue of roadless area management through a roadless area review. Then we conducted a second roadless area review. Then we tried to resolve the issue through local forest planning. The fruit of our efforts was a cornucopia of lawsuits, controversy, judicial intervention, and controversial congressional riders. At current rates, we will build about 1,444 miles of new roads into roadless areas in the next 5 years. Without a new direction, many new road-building projects will be mired in costly lawsuits that yield no winners or losers, only division and contention.

So we're taking the bull by the horns and proposing to decide the fate of our roadless areas once and for all. Our roadless area conservation proposal would:

- Prohibit road building on 43 million acres of roadless areas in the lower 48 States. A decision in Alaska will be deferred to April 2004.
- All other uses will be decided during forest planning at the local level, allowing managers and local people the opportunity to evaluate how, and whether, they want to protect the socially and ecologically important values of roadless areas.

What are the practical effects of our roadless proposal?

- Water quality and aquatic habitat in roadless areas will remain some of the best in the Nation. That means clean drinking water for millions of downstream residents and millions saved in potential costly water treatments. It also means excellent fishing and outstanding opportunities for other water-based recreation.
- Wildlife habitat will remain protected from fragmentation and invasive species, providing excellent hunting and opportunities for other wildland recreation. As open space and other lands are developed or closed to hunting and fishing, roadless areas will continue to provide high-quality hunting.
- Public access will be protected. Our proposed roadless rule will not close a single mile of road or block any existing access to public lands. Opportunities for OHV use and the fate of existing roads will be decided at the local level, just as they are now.

These are among our last wild places. Roadless area conservation will preserve existing public access to public lands while prohibiting new roads that we don't need and can't afford. Our roads policy will ensure that the roads Americans need for their favorite hunting, fishing, hiking, and other outdoor spots are safe and environmentally sound. The roads we don't need will be decommissioned or converted to other uses as fast as funding allows.

Recreation Opportunities

The opportunities we have to serve Americans through recreation are endless. Americans cherish their national forests and grasslands for the values they provide—clean water, clean air, scenic beauty in natural outdoor settings, abundant wildlife, opportunities for personal and spiritual growth, and choices for future generations. Most people experience these values and benefits primarily through recreation. Recreation is the main way that Americans experience not only the land, but also the services that we at the Forest Service provide. Here are just a few of the recreation opportunities that our 192 million acres of national forests and grasslands provide:

- 399 wilderness areas—63% of the wilderness system in the lower 48 States;
- 4,268 miles of the Wild and Scenic River System;
- 60% of downhill skiing in the United States;
- 50% of the blue-ribbon trout streams in the United States;
- 23,000 developed recreation sites;
- 50% of the elk, bighorn sheep, and mountain goat in the lower 48 States;
- 133,087 miles of hiking, horse, and OHV trails;
- 277,000 heritage sites;
- More than 4,300 campgrounds; and
- 31 national recreation areas, national scenic areas, and national monuments.

These Forest Service resources form a unique niche of nature-based, dispersed recreation. We offer undeveloped settings in natural surroundings, together with constructed environments (such as interpretive facilities) that reinforce the natural character of the broader wildland setting. Through our resources, the Forest Service opens a window to the natural world for the enjoyment and appreciation of an increasingly urban society.

How can we enlarge the window to our special places and experiences? How can we open the window even wider to more Americans from diverse backgrounds? These are the challenges we face in the 21st century. To meet them, the Forest Service is developing a recreation agenda for the 21st century. I won't go into details, but I will give you an idea of its general thrust.

- • We will maintain high-quality outdoor settings based on healthy, thriving watersheds and ecosystems. That includes protecting and restoring the natural character of the land. Roadless area conservation dovetails with our recreation goals by meeting the public's need for high-quality dispersed recreation, such as excellent fishing and hunting.
- • We will provide access to OHVs and all other legitimate uses, based on a shared understanding that multiple use does not mean using every acre in every possible way.

We will work with each recreational community to negotiate rules, such as designated trails.

- • We will encourage travel and tourism in collaboration with tourism professionals who represent the entire spectrum of current and potential visitors to the national forests and grasslands.
- • We will base our recreation policy on sound physical, biological, and social science. That includes developing ways to obtain hard facts and figures on recreational uses and needs.
- • We will provide services for all Americans, including racial and ethnic minorities and people with disabilities. That includes active outreach through our volunteer programs.
- • We will actively promote conservation education through learning-based recreation, focusing on youth, visitors, and urban communities. Working through our volunteer programs and our 56 visitor centers, we will build partnerships for education with nongovernmental organizations and other interested parties.
- • We will build partnerships with local communities to protect local interests, address local needs, and provide universal public access. That includes addressing special issues in our urban and heavily used national forests, such as carrying capacity and competing uses.
- • We will build business and intergovernmental partnerships to enhance recreational opportunities on our national forests and grasslands.

The Forest Service will work with partners to provide recreation opportunities for all Americans on our national forests and grasslands, always within the limits of the land.

Recreation: An American Birthright

“If bread is the first necessity of life, recreation is a close second,” Edward Bellamy wrote in *Looking Backward*. Recreation is indeed a necessity, and we are fortunate to live in a Nation where recreation on public lands is every citizen’s birthright.

I have always believed the outdoor recreation community to be among the most important, and least heard, of all the constituencies that use and care for public lands. We had over 500,000 people participate in the scoping phase of the roadless issue alone. This is democracy in action. It’s about presenting choices for the American people to help us decide.

I believe the debate over public lands is as heated as it is today because, too often, we allow the minority of extremist views to take up the majority of the debate. To my way of thinking, the outdoor recreation community is often the silent majority in these debates over roads, roadless areas, and how our forests and grasslands are to be managed for present and future generations.

You are the lynchpin in helping to build the majority coalition that carries us to a sustainable future. Consider the issue of chip mills in the South.

Chip mills use low-quality, small-diameter trees. Many chip mills have moved to the South, where they are accelerating the harvest of hardwood timber on private forestlands. In some cases, forests that, in the past, were successfully regrown from selective cutting are today being clearcut to feed the chip mills. Many residents in the South believe that the harvest methods used to feed the chip mills are compromising the hunting, fishing, and scenic beauty of the land they call home.

In 1977, the net growth of softwood forests was 6.3 billion cubic feet in the Southeast. About 4.5 billion cubic feet were harvested. In 1997, the net growth of softwood forests was 5.9 billion cubic feet and about 6.5 billion cubic feet were harvested. Although growth levels of hardwood forests still exceed removals, hardwood harvest levels are beginning to approach hardwood forest growth levels.

This is not some abstract debate involving little-known plants, rare fish, or reclusive owls. The issue is a question of basic sustainability. Harvest levels cannot exceed growth if forests are to continue providing healthy fish and wildlife habitats, clean and pure drinking water, and scenic beauty. In fact, because of water quality concerns, the State of Missouri placed a 2-year moratorium on stormwater permits for chip mills.

Now, this is not an issue that the Forest Service can, or will, try to control or regulate. These are private lands, largely. All we can do, and what we are doing today through our interagency and interstate Southern Resources Assessment, is to provide technical resources, science, and information to help frame the debate for decisionmakers.

You can make a difference. For example, seven of the Nation's top whitewater recreation companies—including Dagger, Perception, Patagonia, Lotus Designs, Harmony, Mountain Surf, and the Nantahala Outdoor Center—proposed a timeout on new chip mills until we can better assess their ecological impacts and ensure that the recreation communities' economic and environmental interests are not compromised.

The issue in this case was chip mills; and I applaud the recreation community for getting involved and taking a stand. Other recreation groups, such as local ORV users, are working with the Forest Service to maintain eroding trails that can damage water quality. But the issue could involve roadless area conservation, road management, habitat improvements, or conservation education. My plea is that you get involved. Make your voice heard. These are your lands. Your birthright. Your legacy to pass on to your children and their children's children.