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## Roadless Areas on the National Forests — Déjà Vu All Over Again?

Some issues critical to national forest management just never get settled. The fate of “roadless areas” is one.

When I was Chief of the Forest Service (1994-1996), it was clear that we had “hit the wall” in sustaining the 12 billion board feet per year timber targets from 191 million acres of national forests. And, clearly, forest planning had, under severe political pressure, inappropriately — due to low forest productivity, steep topography, and higher alternative values — designated millions of acres as “suitable for timber harvest.” Supervisors shied away from building roads therein because it made no economic, ecological, or political sense. Still, those same supervisors had not “bitten the bullet” and adjusted forest plans to remove those acres from the “suitable for timber harvest” category.

Many of those areas were “roadless areas.” To bring matters to a head, I ordered forest supervisors to begin building roads into those areas and harvesting timber or institute action to alter forest plans. They did neither. Caught between a rock (meeting the planned timber targets) and a hard place (building roads that made no economic or ecological sense), they simply accepted a decline in timber production. In 1994, Congress simply refused to fund the road construction into roadless areas. Given that action, I was content to allow the fate of the roadless areas to be settled in the next round of

forest planning. That approach, though sure to be slow, protracted, and expensive, would have followed extant law and processes with forest-by-forest land-use decision making.

After my tenure, my successor, with Administration support, began actions to address the roadless issue on all the national forests all in one bite. Shortly before leaving office, President Clinton declared that all “roadless areas” exceeding 5,000 acres would remain in that state. The environmental community and many in the hunting and fishing community were ecstatic. Others involved in the wood products and mining businesses were equally opposed. Others simply resented the process used to accomplish the preservation of roadless areas. The matter became an issue in the Gore vs. Bush presidential election.

In 2004, a federal judge in Wyoming ruled the process used to protect roadless areas illegal. The Administration, in a tell-tale signal, did not appeal the ruling. The new state of affairs required that the Administration develop a process to consider the fate of roadless areas. This was done through administrative action that said, in essence, unless governors of affected states chose to opt out, the issue would be reopened on a state-by-state basis, with the individual states making recommendations as to the future status of individual roadless areas on a state-by-state basis. However, the Forest Service (read Administration in power) would retain the final say.

Whether one agrees with or appreciates this action, it represents a potential

sea-change in national forest management. Why should hunters and anglers care?

Roadless areas, in general, represent some of the best fish and wildlife habitat on public lands. The bad news is that there is nothing positive about a road where fish and wildlife habitat are concerned — absolutely nothing. The good news is that access is improved for hunters and fisherman, but at a cost in habitat quality.

Several factors affect whether roads get built in roadless areas. First, the Forest Service has built roads in nearly every circumstance where it made any sense at all, plus some where it didn't. Second, road standards and costs have so increased that cost/benefit analyses make it unlikely that such roads would prove feasible. Third, Congress has proven reluctant to provide for adequate upkeep of the current road system and seems unlikely to fund new roads in ecologically and politically sensitive areas, especially when budget deficits are soaring and there is a multibillion backlog of road maintenance and repair. Fourth, there likely will be a guaranteed and protracted fight — political, legal, and otherwise — about building roads into roadless areas.

Then, there is the new regulation that affords state governors a say in the future of roadless areas on federal lands. Why?

Regardless of how you feel relative to this shift in national forest management, it would be well for you to become informed and involved. As my old hunting partner reminded me, “We don't make roadless areas. We make roaded areas and, once we do that, there is no going back.” ■

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