

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Statement

**STATEMENT OF
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Before the
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
Committee on Resources
United States House of Representatives
Regarding
Public Access to Arkansas' National Forests
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MADAM CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss public access to Arkansas' national forests. I am Elizabeth Estill, Regional Forester for the Southern Region of the Forest Service. Accompanying me today are Alan Newman, Forest Supervisor of the Ouachita National Forest, and Charles Richmond, Forest Supervisor of the Ozark and St. Francis National Forests.

Providing access to our national forests is becoming increasingly important, especially in the South as our population grows. The southern states have gained more population over the past three decades than any other region in the country. Today, we have 31 million more people than we did 30 years ago. That is growth of 54 percent compared to 34 percent for the nation as a whole. In addition, more than 500 acres of trees or nearly one square mile is lost to development each day. Public access to private land for recreation opportunities is limited. Only about 6.5 percent of the private land base that is suitable for outdoor recreation is actually available for public recreational use. As a result, the 13 million acres of national forests in the states of the Southern Region are becoming increasingly more important as a provider of recreational and other multiple use opportunities for the public.

Today, some 60 million people--two out of every three residents in the South--live within an hour's drive of a national forest. As population pressures increase, the ever-growing competing interests of horseback riders, hikers, bikers, ATV riders, anglers, campers, bird watchers, and rafters have become a major challenge for local forest managers. These competing interests for access are not limited to recreational users but also include loggers, oil and gas permittees, archaeologists, research scientists, and a wide variety of other forest users.

The national forests of the South have and will continue to provide outstanding opportunities for differing interests and users. However, we must work collaboratively within the limits of the land. At the local level we are working cooperatively to share ideas and opinions about how public lands should be managed.

For example, on the Ouachita National Forest, a 1991 forest plan amendment established a goal of one mile of road open to motorized use per square mile. This goal was based on reducing negative impacts to wildlife from the existing open road densities of nearly two miles per square mile. We are making progress towards this goal through individual project level environmental analyses and decisions, which emphasize local citizen involvement.

In our efforts to protect the land and its resources by reducing road densities, we are also working diligently to protect the public's ability to access national forest land. We are continuously developing and updating road rights-of-way cooperative agreements with adjacent private landowners and local governments.

Besides providing road access to the Ouachita and Ozark and St. Francis National Forests, we maintain over 1,000 miles of trails. Many of these trails are multiple use trails allowing both motorized and non-motorized use. We appreciate the many local citizens and user groups that assist us in providing and maintaining these trail opportunities. We will continue to emphasize local decision-making in determining the need for public access and the level of maintenance our roads and trails receive.

The public and state, local, and tribal governments have an important role to play in other aspects of national forest management. Their input is critical as we assess conditions of forest resources to present a clear picture of the unique role--and resource capability--that each national forest plays within its sub-regional setting.

Recently, the Agency worked with the citizens of Arkansas to complete the Ozark-Ouachita Highlands assessment. This assessment provides baseline resource data that we will use during the Ouachita and Ozark and St. Francis National Forests Land and Resource Management Plan revision process, scheduled to begin in 2001. The public will have an integral role in shaping the revised forest plans that will guide these Forests in the future. Access will be a key topic throughout the entire revision process.

As you are aware, the Forest Service is also working on a roadless area conservation proposal and a new policy to improve management of our existing Forest Service road system. The roadless area conservation proposal aims to conserve and enhance the important social and ecological values of roadless areas within the National Forest System. Given increased urbanization and development, roadless areas in the South and across America provide important benefits, such as dispersed recreation, pure drinking water, and habitat for fish and wildlife, that are increasingly important to the American people and their children.

The proposed action would conserve roadless areas by generally prohibiting new road construction in inventoried roadless areas of the National Forest System. It would also require local managers to evaluate and consider roadless area characteristics in the context of overall multiple-use objectives during the revision of individual forest plans. The Agency published a draft environmental impact statement and proposed rule for public review on May 10, 2000. The public comment period generated tremendous response nation-wide. In Arkansas, we hosted ten meetings and more than 1,000 citizens turned out to participate.

The roadless area conservation proposal will not block access to national forests and grasslands. It will not close any existing authorized roads, nor will it block legal access to private or state land or affect other valid

existing rights. All proposed alternatives would ensure that decisions about road closures and off highway vehicles would continue to be made at the local level.

In Arkansas, of the nearly 2.6 million acres of national forest land, approximately 96,000 acres, or 3.7 percent, are within inventoried roadless areas. In addition to having no effect on currently permitted access, the proposed roadless area conservation rule will not significantly affect timber harvest. We anticipate less than one percent of the estimated 882 million board feet we plan to offer on the national forests in Arkansas over the next five years would be affected by the proposed rule.

The real access issue for national forests is not whether to build new roads into roadless areas but addressing the problems of our existing 380,000-mile road system. Nationwide, we have an estimated \$8.4 billion maintenance and reconstruction backlog. In fact, we lose an average of 1,100 miles of road a year to passenger travel simply because we cannot afford to maintain them to safety and environmental standards. We continue to face real challenges on the Arkansas national forests of maintaining our existing transportation infrastructure. In fact, the Arkansas national forests only receive about 20 percent of their annual road maintenance funding needs. We appreciate the recognition by Congress of these needs and have seen a significant increase nationally in our annual road maintenance appropriations over the last several years. However, we continue to have a long way to go.

Our road management policy is aimed at making our existing road system more safe, responsive to public needs, environmentally sound, and affordable to manage. By working collaboratively with our local communities, we are better able to identify needed and unneeded roads and prioritize our limited road maintenance funding to establish a forest road system that better serves resource objectives and public uses of national forest lands.

SUMMARY

The South's forests are facing some formidable challenges across the landscape. There are increasing demands for open space, population growth is at an all time high, and people are competing for a shrinking land base to serve every need, from recreation to commodities.

In short, southern forests--public and private--are trying to meet unprecedented demands for goods and amenities. Our challenge is ensuring we meet those unprecedented demands without sacrificing the outstanding ecological and resource values the present and future generations of Americans have entrusted to us.

I believe the answer will come by working together with natural resource leaders, local government officials, users, and other interested publics who desire access to the national forests for all to use and enjoy within the limits of the land. By making decisions based on the latest scientific information and considering the availability of funding for maintenance and operation over the long-term, we can ensure people will have continued access to their national forests.

This concludes my written statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you have.

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