

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Statement

ARKANSAS SIERRA CLUB

Not Blind Opposition to Progress but Opposition to Blind Progress

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health

Rep. Helen Chenoweth-Hage, Chairman

U.S. House of Representatives

Washington DC 20515

August 10, 2000

Dear Madame Chairman and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee,

My name is Tom McKinney and I am the Conservation Chair for the Arkansas Sierra Club, a conservation organization consisting of 1,800 members here in Arkansas and 700,000 members nation wide. I want to thank you for giving me the chance to speak to the Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health today on the matter of Public Access to Arkansas' National Forests. To get right to the point, there is not a major problem with public access to the Ozark and Ouachita National Forests in Arkansas. In fact the exact opposite is the case.

According to information provided by the Ozark National Forest Service there are 5,400 miles of roads within the boundaries of the forest that can be accessed by vehicles in one form or another. There are an additional 1,500 miles of joint county and Forest Service roads which are all-weather roads, bringing the total amount of roads in the Ozark National Forest alone to 6,900 miles within its 1.2 million acres. There is just as extensive a road system within the Ouachita National Forest, which brings the total road system mileage in the two forests to approximately 13,800 miles, or over half the circumference of the earth. In other words - there are enough roads now existing in the Ozark and Ouachita National Forests to drive a vehicle over halfway around the world and not drive on any road more than once. I want to say this again - there are enough roads now existing in the Ozark and Ouachita National Forests to drive a vehicle over half way around the world. Surely nobody should make a legitimate claim that this is not adequate access to our National Forests.

In fact it is more than adequate since the U.S. Forest Service readily admits that they do not have funds enough to maintain the existing road system it currently has in place. I believe it would be a waste of the taxpayer's money to construct more roads which would only add to the \$8 Billion backlog of road maintenance which currently exists throughout the U.S. Forest Service road system nation wide.

If we are talking about the Roadless Area Initiative sponsored by President Clinton then a few facts need to be brought to light. This program closes no roads - it simply prevents the construction of new ones. Roads that, I think I have illustrated, are not needed. School districts will not lose any money under this proposal. Money from timber sales is returned to the state, not individual counties, and is included in the

Miscellaneous Fund of the Education Department. The \$4.7 million Forest Reserve Funds from fiscal 1998 made up all of .0034% (thirty-four one-thousandths percent) of the total Arkansas Department of Education budget. The Forest Reserve Fund money simply goes into the pool of all other tax money to ensure that the minimum state standard of \$4,000 per-student is achieved. If tax revenue from any county is not adequate to reach that standard then it is met with supplemental money from the Department of Education. No county or district gets extra money from the state unless they first reach that minimum level of \$4,000. Only two school districts in the whole state of Arkansas have that honor and they contain no National Forest lands. If the Timber Reserve fund is decreased, or eliminated all together, the state will simply shift money from some other fund to make up any shortfall. So I want to say again, no Arkansas school district will lose any money as a result of the Roadless Area Initiative.

Though some people are more than willing to drive everywhere they go in our National Forests, they should not be able to do so. These are, after all, forests. They do not handle roads and vehicular traffic well without suffering extensive damage. How much damage do they suffer? If you examine the environmental documents published by the Ozark and Ouachita National Forests in conjunction with their timber sale programs you will notice that they do not consider erosion of soil due to road construction and logging as a significant problem. They are wrong. They are not only wrong but they are wrong to the extent that they are seriously harming the very resources they are mandated by law to protect.

How can I say this with such confidence? Because we, the Sierra Club and another group called the Newton County Wildlife Association, have done something the Ozark and Ouachita National Forests have refused to do; we have conducted numerous on-the-ground and site specific studies to measure the actual environmental effects logging and road construction projects have on the forest. From 1994 to 1997 we examined six separate projects in the Ozark National Forest - Junction, Sandy Springs, Sand Gap, Round Hill, Fly Gap and the Headwaters Project. We were fortunate to have the services of some of the nation's leading experts in the field of environmental geology (Dr. Robert Curry), silviculture (Dr. Bill Ferrell), and Arkansas fisheries biology (Dr. Cynthia Annette) to conduct our studies. After examining all six of the project sites our experts set up site specific and on-the-ground observations for the two sites which were to be logged first - Sand Gap and Round Hill.

They took baseline studies of existing conditions on these sites before any disturbance occurred, they then examined the sites as the roads were being built and as the forest was being logged, and we examined the sites after operations were completed. The results of what they measured and the environmental damage that occurred was far beyond the scope of what the U.S. Forest Service projected in the Environmental Assessment (EA) documents.

How far? We found totally new roads, which were classified as "reconstructed roads," located in stands of documented old growth timber when an existing road was located not fifty feet away. The "reconstructed roads" were actually new roads relocated along a different and ALWAYS more steeply inclined and difficult route. We found roads constructed to a wider width than the EA called for. We found roads constructed to a longer length than called for in the EA and being routed through areas not documented or flagged. We found many additional roads not contained in the EA. We found roads that were scheduled for "Maintenance" in the EA which did not exist. We found relocated roads that were twice as long as the EA called for once we followed the flagged route of the relocated road. We found what we came to call "recreational bulldozing" which consisted of meandering paths that bulldozers would take through the woods for no apparent reason. We found stands of 350 and 400-year-old trees girdled by chainsaws and left to die. We found total misclassification of stand types and stand ages, which appeared to be done to hide the fact that old growth timber was being cut.

We found actual erosion from logging and logging roads exceeded Forest Service projections by up to 25 times (not percent but times) above what was projected in the EA. This amount reached up to 100 times (two orders of magnitude) on some sites. According to Dr. Curry these very large errors were not caught because the Forest Service does not monitor its roads to check their hydrological models. In my opinion they do not monitor their roads because they do not want to find out how much erosion is actually occurring. That would interfere with their plans.

We found a single tributary of Richland Creek and Richland Creek itself choked with sediment to the equivalent of 80 full size dump truck loads, all traced back to only one short section of one road accessing only one stand of the Round Hill Project. We found pools in Richland Creek clogged with this silt and filled with hundreds of suffocated fish. We found that this silt plume extended all of the way to and entered the Buffalo National River. It was Dr. Annette's opinion that erosion such as this is a threat to the Buffalo River and its fishery.

According to the Ozark National Forest's EAs on these projects, none of this was supposed to happen. But it did and it did so because the Forest Service relies upon outdated, dishonest and skewed documents designed to ignore or minimize the impact of logging and road building in our national forests.

We have also discovered that most of the users of the forest, be they hikers, canoers, or four wheel enthusiasts, actually want to protect our woods. Most of them would even like to see the Forest Service simply leave the National Forests alone so they could enjoy them. The timber industry and the Forest Service itself are the exception to this of course. We have discovered that some of these users, especially four wheeling enthusiasts, do not realize how much damage their activities can cause to the forest and its streams. Once they do realize how much erosion can be caused by roads, unregulated off road vehicle use and poorly located trails then they are more than willing to take steps to stop or minimize this damage. Part of solving this problem is a process of education in soil erosion and the damage it causes, but it must be an education based upon facts and reality rather than the fanciful flirts of fantasy in which the Forest Service is engaged.

Finally, we should have fewer roads in our National Forests because that is what the vast majority of the public wants. Poll after poll, no matter whether they are conducted by companies commissioned by environmentalists or the Republican Party, show that anywhere from 65% to almost 80% of the American people want logging and road building stopped on our public lands. A poll conducted in the ten counties containing the Ozark National Forest found the same results. The vast majority of roads in our National Forests are built for logging operations. In project after project in the Ozark and Ouachita National Forests the public asked the U.S. Forest Service not to conduct logging operations. In the Sandy Springs Project in the Ozark National Forest over 700 comments opposed that logging project. Yet the Forest Service proceeded with logging operations. In the Headwaters Project over 350 comments opposed the logging and road building, including comments from EVERY private property inholder in the project area. Yet the Ozark National Forest Service proceeded. Over 2,000 public comments and petition signatures opposed logging in the Buffalo Project in the headwaters of the Buffalo National River, yet that project was simply split into numerous smaller projects and the area logged anyway. Even when the Ozark National Forest Service proposed to log adjacent to and along the Pig Trail Scenic Byway, thousands of comments and petition signatures failed to stop them. Only when members of Arkansas' Congressional Delegation intervened was the project withdrawn. The Forest Service is best at asking the public for input and comments for a logging project and then ignoring all of those comments which do not support what they and the timber industry want to do - cut timber and build roads.

What is obvious is that the public as a whole wants fewer roads, more roadless areas, and the cessation of logging operations and more emphasis on watershed protection and forest preservation. I am afraid the only ones who have not gotten this message are the National Forests themselves and the timber industry. Thank you very much.

Sincerely

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