

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Statement / Witness Testimony

Statement of

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Forests and Forest Health

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Concerning

Effect of Forest Service Rule Making Efforts on National Forest Recreation

Madam Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the effects several proposed Forest Service rule making efforts could have on recreational opportunities in the national forests.

The Forest Service is currently undertaking several rule making efforts. These include developing regulations for forest planning, for long-term road management, and for roadless area protection. Before discussing the consequences of each rule individually, I would like to provide some context.

In 1998, we developed the natural resource agenda to provide an ecosystem-based approach to our multiple use mission.

The natural resource agenda focuses on:

- Watershed health and restoration
- Roads and roadless areas
- Sustainable forest and grassland ecosystems

- Recreation

This agenda reaffirms our commitment to our roots, our commitment to caring for the land, our commitment to serving people, our commitment to sustainability, and our commitment to conservation.

One of the cornerstones of our natural resource agenda is recreation--the fastest growing use of our national forests. Outdoor recreation is the window through which an increasingly urban society enjoys nature, learns about conservation of natural resources, and develops an appreciation for the outdoors. Recreation and tourism is the nation's third leading industry, and national forests and grasslands are the nation's largest source of outdoor recreation opportunities. These lands have unparalleled opportunities for skiing, hiking, camping, boating, motorized recreation, and many other recreational pursuits.

Access to our national forests is available via more than 380,000 miles of roads and 133,000 miles of trails. In addition, the national forests contain 4,385 miles of wild and scenic rivers, one-third of the entire wilderness preservation system, 23,000 developed recreation sites including 18,000 campgrounds, picnic areas, and visitor facilities, and 200,000 miles of fishable streams. Given these extensive recreational opportunities, recreation use is exploding on national forests and grasslands.

The Forest Service must meet the Nation's growing need for outdoor recreation, especially as the public demands an ever-broader spectrum of benefits and services to enrich their experiences. Moreover, many communities are continuing to diversify and expand their economic base to capture economic benefits from heritage and recreation tourism.

Recognizing this increasing demand for recreational opportunities, we will implement a national recreation agenda this year that focuses on providing people with amazing recreational experiences on the public lands without impairing the productivity of the land. Our strategy will focus on four key areas:

- Settings
- Services
- Communities
- Relationships

"Settings" refers to the natural environment and the facilities, structures, or recreation use areas used by national forest system visitors.

"Services" refers to gaining a better understanding of the customers we serve in order to improve the information and services we provide.

"Communities" refers to improving community cooperation in planning efforts and working with local and regional stakeholders to improve or address economic development opportunities.

"Relationships" focuses on improving partnerships and interaction with the business community, federal, state, local, and Tribal governments, and non-governmental organizations, such as tourism associations, activity-related groups, and environmental organizations.

We are developing a six-point action plan to meet objectives for improving settings, services, communities, and relationships by the year 2006. These six points are as follows:

- First, we need to know the people we serve. We will train employees and employ social science and market research to better understand public values, expectations, and potential conflicts to meet the needs of the recreating public.
- Second, we will invest in special places most valued by people. We will identify the most sought after places and ensure quality experiences while providing opportunities for community investment in recreation and tourism. We will eliminate unacceptable damage to sensitive areas, such as wilderness and riparian areas, and encourage use of other, more resilient areas.
- Third, we will reduce the recreation infrastructure maintenance backlog. For example, we will employ recreation fee revenues to improve on-site recreational facilities and services, leverage revenues through challenge cost share agreements, encourage local forest-community partnerships, and strengthen volunteer programs.
- Fourth, we will develop partnerships for natural and cultural resource conservation education and interpretation. We will build upon successful partnerships with groups such as the Girl and Boy Scouts, and the National Outdoor Leadership School, and expand successful inner city programs, such as Youth Conservation Corps.
- Fifth, we will develop business opportunities with greater focus on underserved and low income communities. Changing demographics allow many opportunities to improve access, services, and programs to underserved and low-income communities.
- Sixth, access to the national forests and grasslands is a key component of our management responsibilities. We will seek to meet the need for public access to the national forests by providing for use and visitor safety within the ecological limits of the land. We will pursue rights-of-way and other means to ensure access to national forests and improve access for disabled citizens.

The overriding objective of our recreation strategy will be to maintain and expand public recreation opportunities on national forests and grasslands in a manner that benefits local communities and conserves the health of our lands and waters. We also believe that receiving Congressional approval of our proposed FY 2001 budget and legislative proposals would enhance our ability to meet the growing demands for recreational opportunities on the national forests.

With that context, I would like to discuss the three major rule-making efforts that the Forest Service is undertaking. These initiatives also stem from the Forest Service's natural resource agenda and serve to address critical conservation issues on national forest system lands.

Proposed Forest Planning Regulations

The proposed planning rule is based on three themes:

- Affirming sustainability as the foundation of national forest and grassland management
- Improving cooperation and collaboration
- Better integrating science into the planning and management of national forests

The proposed rule is designed to facilitate greater public collaboration in all phases of the planning process. It encourages Forest Service land managers to build cooperative relationships with individuals, groups, State and local governments, Tribes, and other federal agencies. This increased collaborative planning will help us meet some of the actions I outlined earlier in our national recreation agenda. This framework will ensure public involvement and ownership in planning and decision-making for sustainable recreation use on the national forests and grasslands. Implementation of the proposed planning rule will promote the integration of social and market research on recreation into forest plans and Forest Service activities. The proposed rule will also allow forest managers to more readily address recreational issues and opportunities raised by the public, monitoring, scientific information, and new laws and policies.

Road Management Policy

We have published a draft road management policy with the objective of improving public access to public lands within the limits of the health of the land. This policy will focus on the road system of the future.

The intent of the roads policy is to provide a road system that allows for safe and efficient public use, is economically and environmentally sound, and is manageable within current budget constraints. It does not limit access by off highway vehicle or other recreation users. The policy does not mandate the closure of specific roads. It encourages land managers to collect scientific information and work with the public to identify needed and unneeded roads. The Forest Service can then target its limited reconstruction and maintenance dollars on needed roads and decommission unneeded or environmentally damaging roads. All transportation management decisions will be made at the local level in the future through scientific roads analysis and public involvement. The Forest Service will continue to work hard to ensure that the roads people use are adequately maintained, signed, and mapped, and to cooperate with States, Tribes, counties, and recreational users in providing seamless access for the public's enjoyment of these lands.

Roadless Rule-making:

We are in the process of developing the draft environmental impact statement and accompanying proposed rule that will be out for public review in May.

Roadless and unroaded areas provide some of the most important settings for many dispersed recreation opportunities on our national forests and grasslands. Many roadless areas are characterized by high quality scenery with large, natural-appearing landscapes and little evidence of people or management activities. Although we have not selected an alternative for future management of roadless and unroaded areas, maintaining their undeveloped character would continue to enhance dispersed recreation opportunities, such as hiking, horseback riding, mountain biking, snowmobiling, and other appropriate motorized activities. Because of their undeveloped character, they also provide favored areas for wildlife, providing unique opportunities for wildlife viewing and hunting.

Conclusion:

The current rule-making efforts form a coherent strategy for dealing with today and tomorrow's conservation challenges. They will enable the Forest Service to make better decisions about recreational issues and better investments in the infrastructure and services the public desires. The roadless and roads policies address this issue head-on.

I want to emphasize that none of the current rule-making efforts are intended to block access to national forests and grasslands. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. In 1997, 860 million national forest visitors took advantage of more than 23,000 recreation facilities and hundreds of thousands of miles of forest roads, trails and scenic byways. The real threat to access on the national forests and grasslands is our inability to maintain the existing transportation and recreation infrastructure--with a several billion-dollar backlog and growing.

In summary, Madam Chairman, it is my belief that our rule-making efforts will enhance and sustain recreation opportunities for generations of Americans to come. I would be glad to answer any questions you may have.

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