

Mollie Matteson: Logging is destructive and wrong in National Forest roadless areas

By MOLLIE MATTESON

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When the U.S. Forest Service adopted the landmark Roadless Area Conservation Rule in 2001, it was the result of the most extensive and popular rule making in the history of our federal government. More than 1 million Americans commented on the rule, more than 95 percent of whom supported the conservation measures it established.

The "roadless rule," as it is better known, has a simple purpose: to maintain our last, best national forest lands as they are, as havens for wildlife, clean water and air, and backcountry recreation. The rule creates protections for the last 58 million acres of roadless land in the national forest system, including carefully considered limits on road construction, mining, logging and other forms of extractive development that harm forests and wildlife.

Hundreds of scientific studies have demonstrated the importance of undeveloped lands to wildlife populations, healthy ecosystems and the services -- like flood control, water quality and healthy fisheries -- that they provide to people. That consensus was codified in a 2004 letter from 127 scientists -- among them biologists Jane Goodall and E.O. Wilson -- to the Bush administration requesting that all remaining national forest roadless areas be protected.

Public sentiment for northeastern forests echoes the same. According to the Forest Service's own data, nearly 45 percent of those who commented on the White Mountain National Forest's 2005 Forest Plan spoke to the issue of roadless area conservation -- more than any other topic -- and of these, more than 90 percent supported protecting Inventoried Roadless Areas.

But officials at the White Mountain National Forest think differently. Rather than protect the Northeast's last, best forest lands, they've undertaken a defiant and radical program of road building and logging -- even clear-cutting -- within the Forest Service's Inventoried Roadless Areas, a program marked to date by four finalized timber sale plans.

In November, the Forest Service approved plans for road construction, clear-cutting and logging in the Kilkenny Inventoried Roadless Area as part of the Mill Brook timber sale -- this despite more than 1,000 public comments urging roadless area protection. In December, the Forest Service released its plan to log in the Sandwich 4 Inventoried Roadless Area, and in the next few weeks, the agency intends to finalize another roadless area logging project: Stevens Brook.

The Forest Service also ordered clear-cutting in the South Carr Mountain and the Wild River inventoried roadless areas (near Warren and Jackson, respectively) this fall in the Batchelder Brook and Than Brook timber sales. Despite a pending lawsuit and the availability of cutting units outside of roadless areas, the Forest Service ordered clear-cutting the roadless areas first -- and did so amidst near-record rainfall, resulting in hip-deep tractor ruts.

The White Mountain National Forest's radical behavior elucidates the Forest Service's age-old timber bias. As if stuck in the 1950s, the Forest Service's actions show how, when left to its own devices by an environmentally hostile administration, the service still places timber production above all other public values.

This is a travesty both for a region where virtually all unroaded forest lands outside of public ownership are on a fast-track to development and for the Roadless Area Conservation Rule, which recognizes the national importance of maintaining America's last, best national forest lands throughout the country.

For the sake of these national forest lands and all they provide to our natural and human communities, we need immediate, strong and nationally consistent protections for national forest roadless areas. It is time for

elected and public officials in the Northeast and Washington, D.C., to finally enact the will of the people by ensuring the lasting protection of all national forest roadless areas as part of our rich natural heritage and for the benefit of generations to come.

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