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Richardson Blasts Decision on Forests

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Gov. Bill Richardson and other New Mexico conservationists blasted the Bush administration's decision on Thursday to open roadless areas of national forests to logging, mining and oil and gas drilling.

"The Bush administration's environmental war on the West continues," Richardson said in a national telephone news conference.

Almost all of the country's roadless national forest land is in the Western states.

"What is happening is a wholesale assault by the administration to drill more oil and gas, to open up more roadless areas for timber," Richardson said.

He called the policy "an attack on a way of life" and said it offends environmentalists as well as hunters, anglers and other back-country recreationists.

The decision affects about 1.5 million acres around New Mexico, concentrated most heavily in the Gila National Forest.

The Forest Service has said the impact in New Mexico will be minor because 1.1 million of the roadless acres are protected from development in individual forest plans.

Richardson, however, rejected that reasoning. "Those plans could be changed," he said.

Richardson appears to have the support of New Mexicans. Of the 20,000 who commented on the Bush plan, almost 18,000 wanted more protections for roadless areas.

"This is a classic example of the Bush administration trashing our democracy and trashing our forests," said Bryan Bird of Santa Fe-based Forest Guardians. "Today, the clean drinking water, wildlife, and recreational opportunities of our wild forests are severely endangered."

Todd Schulke of the Center for Biological Diversity in Silver City said places like the Eagle Peak area in the Gila "have had a reprieve from damaging roads and logging" and could suffer under the new policy.

Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., also criticized the decision, saying it would allow road construction in 12 key New Mexico watersheds even though road building can reduce water quality.

"In New Mexico, where water is a precious and sometimes scarce resource, it is essential for us to protect our watersheds," he said. "Unfortunately, this rule effectively lifts a ban on construction of roads in these critical watersheds that provide New Mexico communities with drinking water."

But Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., said the ability to build new roads is critical to protecting areas like the Santa Fe watershed from wildfires.

"Allowing vehicular access makes sense for this area, and under these new regulations, the state and local communities will now have some input in making that decision," Domenici said.

Governors have 18 months to petition the Forest Service for permanent protection for roadless areas.

Richardson said he would ask the Forest Service to protect all the roadless land in New Mexico and urge the Democratic Governors Association -- which he chairs -- and the Western Governors Association to pressure the Forest Service to help states prepare their petitions.