

## **Biden admin hits pause on work in roadless areas**

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The Biden administration is putting a temporary stop to road construction and logging in roadless areas of national forests while officials decide whether the work meshes with environmental and climate policy goals.

In a [Feb. 1 memorandum](#) to Forest Service Chief Vicki Christiansen, the Agriculture Department's acting deputy undersecretary for natural resources and environment, Chris French, said roadless-area proposals and other pending decisions are to be elevated to higher levels at USDA for review by Feb. 12.

The directive, while not unusual for a change in administrations, also represents a bureaucratic twist: French has gone from answering to Christiansen as deputy Forest Service chief to — in an acting capacity — having her answer to him at USDA. At the service, he played a role in some of the actions referenced in the memo, when the Trump administration's priorities were sharply different.

The review applies to Forest Service actions that were to be decided before March 31. Those include road construction, reconstruction and timber harvesting on land that was protected under the Roadless Area Conservation Rule of 2001, as originally written, suggesting it applies to areas such as the Tongass National Forest in Alaska, where the Trump administration last year exempted from the roadless-area rule.

"This review will afford an opportunity to assess applicable facts, law and policy in order to ensure that agency actions are aligned with Administration priorities as identified in recent Executive Orders and assist the Forest Service in fulfilling its multiple-use, sustained-yield mission in its stewardship of the National Forest System," French said.

Forest Service officials have yet to propose any specific projects for the Tongass. The only other states with exemptions are Idaho and Colorado, where states wrote their own rules instead several years ago.

Groups critical of the roadless rule, as well as some Western lawmakers, say forests can and have been protected without such restrictions, since national forests are already governed by extensive land management plans that include environmental reviews. Those plans include a mix of timber targets, recreation goals, and wilderness and wildlife protections. Specific projects are subject to review under the National Environmental Policy Act.

They also advocate a generally less restrictive approach to forest management, saying greater forest thinning and streamlined approvals at the Forest Service would reduce wildfire threats, protect watersheds and help maintain local economies that rely on forest products.

On the other hand, environmental groups, Alaska Native tribes and many Democratic lawmakers say the roadless rule is a critical tool for protecting old-growth forests and other sensitive land that also plays a part in carbon sequestration. The Tongass, at nearly 17 million acres, is the most prominent example.

Environmental groups including the Center for Biological Diversity and the Western Environmental Law Center had asked the administration for higher-level reviews of the Forest Service plans, mirroring an action already taken at the Interior Department ([Greenwire](#), Jan. 29).

The review could slow approval of some projects and possibly lead to reversals, said Ted Zukoski, a senior attorney at the CBD.

"It sends a signal to the field that roadless area protection is of keen interest to the new administration," Zukoski told E&E News. "It sets the stage for maintaining the status quo while the Forest Service decides how it intends to restore roadless area protections to the Tongass."

French identified other areas for review, including activities in designated wilderness areas; mining involving ground disturbance of areas bigger than 500 acres; cutting or removal of more than 3,000 acres of vegetation through categorical exclusions from NEPA; and special use authorizations for energy projects, including pipelines or transmission lines.

The memo doesn't mention specific projects, but groups that requested the review said they believe it would apply to several that they outlined in a letter to the administration, which could face decisions at any time. That could include the logging of 1,826 acres in the Routt National Forest in Colorado — a fuels-reduction project that would include road construction in a designated roadless area through a categorical exclusion, Zukoski said.

One item that appears to have been left out was a review of timber sales in mature and old-growth forests, said Susan Jane Brown, staff attorney with the Western Environmental Law Center.

"My hope is that some of the projects they review will get put on hold," Brown said.

French didn't spell out how long the review may take. The department could make further directives and "may extend the review period timeframe as deemed necessary or appropriate," he said.

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