Utah is fortunate to be home to a unique array of native fish, mammals, reptiles, plants and other wildlife. The state ranks 10th in biodiversity and fifth for species that occur in no other state. For many of these wildlife species, like the nimble northern goshawk, some of the most important habitats in Utah are the remaining roadless forests.

Approximately half of the 8 million acres of national forests in Utah remain intact blocks of habitat that have not been opened to roadbuilding, logging and other development. Since 2001 these areas have been protected from roadbuilding and logging by the U.S. Forest Service’s landmark Roadless Area Conservation Rule that provides essential habitat for native plants and animals, clean drinking water for millions of Americans, and outstanding opportunities for hunting, fishing, hiking, camping and other quiet outdoor recreation. In contrast 370,000-plus miles of roads — more than the entire U.S. Interstate system — crisscross national forests nationwide, harming wildlife, water quality and creating a more than $3 billion road-maintenance backlog.

Roadless areas have an outsized importance for wildlife. Accounting for less than 8 percent of the state, 38 percent of Utah’s 133 sensitive species have been found in roadless areas. These areas also protect millions of acres of crucial habitat for mule deer (3.1 million), elk (2.4 million) and moose (1.7 million).

Maintaining roadless protections for pristine forest is essential to ensure the health of the native fish, bears, bats and birds that call Utah home.

**Utah Aims to Dismantle Protections for Forest Service Roadless Areas**

The state has submitted a petition to the Forest Service to weaken protection for the remaining roadless forests in Utah. If it succeeds companies could bulldoze roads into roadless areas for activities like logging and oil and gas development, destroying crucial wildlife habitats. Few forms of development have a more pervasive and lasting adverse effect on wildlife than road building.

**Roads Harm Wildlife**

Building roads into unroaded areas fundamentally alters the functioning of landscapes, putting pressure on wildlife in numerous ways. The 2015 Utah Wildlife Action Plan found that issues surrounding water, such as the destruction of stream habitat, and spread of invasive species, which are both exacerbated by roadbuilding, were the top two threats to wildlife in Utah and that roads themselves were a chief source of harm.
FOUR MAIN WAYS ROADS HARM WILDLIFE

1. **Roads fragment habitat**

Habitat fragmentation — the process of larger, contiguous areas of habitat being broken up into smaller, disconnected islands — has long been understood to be a leading cause of biodiversity loss in the United States. Habitat fragmentation includes isolation of populations, loss of genetic diversity and local extinctions.

Wildlife need to move unimpeded to find food and shelter, including different seasonal habitats and to find mates with other gene pools. The effects of habitat fragmentation include isolation of populations, loss of genetic diversity and local extinctions.

2. **Roads kill wildlife**

Roads mean vehicles and vehicles mean noise, lights, stress, poaching, chemical spills and roadkill. For example, for the western boreal toad, roads not only act as barriers to travel, but the vehicles that drive on them can also be a significant source of direct mortality.

3. **Roads choke streams with silt**

In mountain forests, roads alter how water flows across the landscape, causing erosion and even landslides, which degrades water quality in rivers and streams. Roads cause chronic sedimentation by acting as channels to transport silt and dirt into streams, which in turn harms native fish by raising stream temperatures and turning clear streams muddy. Because they depend on clean, cool water, many native fish species in Utah like the Bonneville cutthroat trout are particularly vulnerable to the effects of roads.

4. **Roads spread invasive species**

Invasive plants and non-native animals compete with and prey on native species. This is one of the most common threats to imperiled wildlife in the United States. Roads create pathways along which invasive plants become established, crowding out native plant communities wildlife depends on.

**CONCLUSION**

About half of our national forests are currently open to drilling, logging and mining. Protecting the remaining intact forests is critical to ensure healthy populations of native plants and animals. In Utah roadless forests provide crucial refuge for a vast array of species. A robust body of science shows in no uncertain terms that building roads and bringing development into intact habitats like these roadless forests would be detrimental to native wildlife in Utah.

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8 UDWR. 2017. Utah Sensitive Species List. Utah Division of Wildlife Resources. Available at: https://dwrcdc.nr.utah.gov/ucdc/ViewReports/SSL_Appendices.pdf