



Sportsmen flex political muscle in push for state roadless petitions

Dan Berman, *Greenwire* reporter

The political strength of hunting and fishing organizations may be decisive in pressuring state governors to file petitions with the Agriculture Department to maintain roadless protections on national forests in their states.

Governors in 38 states have until mid-November to nominate inventoried roadless areas in national forests for continued protection from roadbuilding, logging, oil and gas drilling, mining or other development under the Bush administration's roadless petition rule. The Bush administration replaced the Clinton-era roadless rule favored by environmentalists, which set aside 58.5 million acres of national forest as roadless.

But while 20 environmental groups have joined three states in filing lawsuits against the petition plan and repeal of the Clinton-era rule, the "hook and bullet" organizations are beginning to take an active role in lobbying governors to attempt to protect roadless areas for their habitat and recreational values.

"The initial reaction we're getting from a lot of governors is, 'Oh God I don't want to do this,'" said Chris Wood, conservation director of Trout Unlimited. "The more they hear about how important this is to sportsmen, the more interested they get."

The Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership is working to organize Western members on the roadless issue, as well as lobbying governors, meeting with newspaper editorial boards and setting up public meetings.

"Hunters and anglers are very concerned about roadless areas," said **Tom St. Hilaire**, the partnership's national campaigns director. "We want to see these places protected and made accessible for hunting and fishing."

The partnership this week developed a four-point memo emphasizing the protection of roadless areas to maximize places where Americans can hunt and fish in pristine public lands and waters.

"Dwindling access to quality hunting and angling opportunities is slowly pulling apart the American sporting tradition," the "**Sportsmen's Rules 4 Roadless Areas**" memo states. The group also urges members to take into account the economic effect of hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation on rural communities. "No one knows the unique value

and benefit of roadless areas better than businesses that provide services and products to outdoorsmen and women."

Former Virginia Gov. Mark Warner (D) cited benefits to recreation and wildlife habitat when he became the first governor to petition USDA for roadless protections on 380,000 acres of national forest last month ([Greenwire](#), Dec. 23).

"It's indisputable that more roads means less habitat and less hunting and fishing," said Bill Geer, a partnership staffer working on the roadless issue in Montana. "You've got to access to it and not through it. There's got to be a body of land at the end of the road but go no further."

'Bread and butter' for Western governors

Hunting and fishing groups believe they may be more successful in getting governors to act than mainstream environmental groups, especially in states with Republican governors or moderate Democratic governors like Montana's Gov. Brian Schweitzer.

"Sportsmen are considered to be slightly more conservative than a mainstream environmental organization," said Sean McMahon of the National Wildlife Federation. "Governors have to be mindful of their base and out West for the most part that means listening to the sportsmen who in some instances helped elect them into office."

Hunting and fishing groups are "universally respected for their knowledge of local landscapes and recognition of which areas are most important to protect for habitat for wildlife and fish," McMahon added.

"Hunter and angler comments are bread and butter," Geer said. "They're ordinary people of every political situation, every economic strata. They're listened to a lot. They're one of the 'newfound' constituencies that were always there but now are being discovered."

Although the Roosevelt partnership, Trout Unlimited and other conservation and sportsmen groups opposed the repeal of the Clinton roadless rule as part of the Forest Roads Working Group, Wood said the state petition plan allows groups like Trout Unlimited to flex their grassroots muscles.

"From a substantive or process perspective we really welcomed it," Wood said. "We're very strong on a grassroots level and this gives our members the chance to weigh in personally."

The process varies in each state considering filing a petition. Some, such as Idaho and Colorado have set up task forces with public hearings to discuss the issue. Others, primarily in states with far fewer inventoried roadless acres, such as Alabama, North Carolina and South Carolina, have no structure in place but their governors are considering petitions.

"It's always easier when the governor sets up parameters for how to submit testimony and for people to be heard on this, and it's happening a lot more in the Western states than Eastern states," St. Hilaire said.

The influence of the hunters and anglers may be more noticeable in the Eastern states, where the amount of land at issue is far smaller than in the West. However, the Eastern roadless areas are seen as particularly important because of sprawling residential development (*Greenwire*, Aug. 18, 2005).

"It's more obvious in the East because you've got a confluence of big populations with sprawling cities and fewer places to hunt and fish than you do in the West," Wood said. "When you look at the places where wild and native fish persist in the East, their strongholds are invariably in the higher elevation public and state lands.

"For organizations such as Trout Unlimited, if your objective is to expand the range of native fish, you need to start where their stronghold is and move outwards. It's almost a perfect mission fit for us."