

Commissioners want status quo for roadless areas

By JENNIFER McKEE –

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HELENA - Montana's 6.4 million acres of federal roadless forest areas don't need any new roads, a group of county commissioners told Gov. Brian Schweitzer Monday.

But commissioners stressed that they don't want to "shut the door forever" on new roads, in case of fires or other emergencies.

"Most people are saying, 'Let's not be building any new roads, but let's not lose any roads that we have, either,'" Ravalli County Commissioner Alan Thompson told the governor.

Schweitzer called the meeting to hear from local leaders about what they want to do with federal roadless forest in their own backyards.

The meeting is the latest in the on-going national debate about what to do with 58 million acres of roadless areas nationwide.

The roadless areas often border federal wilderness areas, or sometimes have been proposed for future wilderness designation, which don't allow roads.

Former President Clinton issued a rule that no new roads could be built in designated roadless areas, but a series of lawsuits has since thrown that rule in limbo.

President Bush responded this year by asking governors to weigh in, and tell the U.S. Forest Service what they'd like to do with roadless areas within their respective states. Governors have until next November to make recommendations.

Response to the president's request has been mixed. A few states have sued, arguing it forces states to undertake a federal responsibility.

In Montana, Schweitzer has asked county commissions to send him specific recommendations about which roads should stay and which should go. He repeatedly told commissioners Monday that he thinks the federal government should concentrate on maintaining the roads it already has, not building new ones in designated roadless areas.

However, Schweitzer agreed with commissioners that the Forest Service should be flexible and allow roads in roadless areas to combat fire, control bugs or some other unforeseen emergency flexibility the old Clinton rule also allowed.

"We want the flexibility to manage these lands," he said. "We need to maintain flexibility, not close the door."

Schweitzer also said he was unsure exactly how much weight his ideas would have with the Bush administration. He said his request this summer for some federal money to help

the state analyze the millions of acres federal roadless lands evidently landed on deaf ears.

He urged commissioners to continue working with their local federal forest leaders.

"That is some place I don't have any juice," Schweitzer said.

Ironically, Colorado and Idaho have received federal money for the project, said Dale Harris, a Missoula businessman and member of the Roadless Area Conservation National Advisory Committee. The group was appointed by federal forest officials to help the U.S. secretary of agriculture put into action the governors' petitions.

"That's what you get for voting for a Democratic governor," Schweitzer said jokingly.

Harris said after the meeting he didn't think party politics played into Montana's lack of federal dollars for the project.

"Montana's request is still sitting on somebody's desk," he said.

Some, like Beaverhead County Commissioner Mike McGinley, said they were concerned the "roadless" designation erroneously contains areas with all kinds of roads. McGinley asked the governor if he could recommend reworking the "roadless" boundaries.

Schweitzer said that level of analysis is beyond what he and his single natural resources policy adviser can do between now and next November.

Schweitzer told the commissioners to give their recommendations to him by March.

Hunting and fishing groups praised both the meeting and the general consensus that roadless areas should stay as they are.

Bill Geer of Missoula, the policy initiative manager for the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, a national hunting-access group, said while hunters like being able to get to hunting areas on roads, they may be willing to compromise by accessing the best and unroaded hunting grounds on foot.

"The truly unroaded areas offer the best habitat," he said.

John Wilson, conservation director for Montana Trout Unlimited, told the governor he was "really encouraged" by the consensus against new roads. But he urged the governor not to ignore the problem of existing, un-maintained roads that erode into streams.

"One of the largest problems we have from existing roads is water quality problems," he said.