

June 7, 2005

George W. Bush
President of the United States of America
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Bush:

In light of the final roadless rule recently announced by your administration, I have been considering the options available to the citizens of Montana regarding management of inventoried roadless lands on National Forests.

The Forest Service has been trying to resolve this issue for upwards of 30 years with little to no success. With each succeeding plan, the issues have become more contentious and irreconcilable. Now your administration, without the benefit of public hearings, has issued a final rule that asks the states to shoulder this burden both administratively and financially.

The Forest Service employs about 2,375 people in Montana, including foresters, biologists, hydrologists, geologists, soil scientists, ecologists, entomologists, range scientists, landscape architects, and public affairs specialists. The Forest Service budget in the state exceeds \$47 million. The State of Montana, on the other hand, has neither the budgetary nor the personnel resources available to take the necessary in-depth look at its 6,397,000 acres of roadless areas.

Furthermore, the final rule stipulates that USDA retains final approval authority over any state roadless rule petition, providing no assurances that state efforts and investments would bear fruit. In other words, Washington has the final say, not Montanans. Shifting the responsibility for management of the nation's roadless areas to the states is an attempt to pass the buck. Worse, it would undoubtedly have the additional effect of entangling the states in a quagmire of court battles.

Four years ago, when the 2001 roadless rule was being considered, Montana went through an exhaustive public process conducted by the Forest Service. During that time, a record 1.6 million Americans participated in a nationwide 15-month effort involving 600 hearings and public meetings. In Montana alone, thousands of citizens commented at one of the 31 public hearings held in both large and small communities. Of the Montana respondents, 78% urged the Forest Service to manage these areas under a strong and enduring conservation policy. Our Montana values and the importance of these mountain areas have not changed.

Roadless areas play a vital role in Montana. Our cities and towns depend on these areas for clean drinking water. They provide both irrigation water and grazing lands for our farmers and ranchers, and critical spawning areas for our blue ribbon trout fisheries. Hunting, outfitting, hiking, horsepacking, camping, wildlife watching, and all sorts of family recreation flourish in Montana's unroaded lands.

These areas have remained wild and undeveloped for good reason. For the most part, timber harvest in Montana's roadless areas is unrealistic and uneconomical. These remote areas do not contain significant amounts of merchantable timber, or they would have been logged previously. They are too steep or rugged, and development would require crossing too many streams or disturb areas where big game herds find security. Our five-week hunting season depends on roadless areas.

At the same time, there are portions of some inventoried roadless areas where accumulations of forest fuels threaten private property, homes, and municipal drinking water sources. Other roadless areas contain developed areas and private property within their boundaries. In these cases, boundary adjustment and limited management to reduce fuel accumulations are important considerations.

The Forest Service in Montana reports a \$588 million backlog of existing forest roads in disrepair. Common sense tells us that building new roads into backcountry areas would cost even more. The federal government has not been budgeting enough to maintain current roads, and the dollars for this maintenance and other management are being cut further with each new budget proposal. Federal dollars should be made available to fund forest management, forest and stream restoration, existing trail and road maintenance, and fuels reduction. With proper management, currently roaded forest lands can supply the logs necessary to keep Montana's mills running. These expenditures would have immense potential for jobs in rural communities across our state.

The Forest Service has the personnel, expertise, site-specific information, and capability best suited to conduct a detailed analysis of each roadless area in an open, public process. If USDA is willing to detail its Forest Service employees and financial resources to the state of Montana for the purpose of conducting the roadless area petitioning process outlined in the recent final rule, perhaps an adequate review of lands coupled with meaningful public input could be accomplished.

In the meantime, I will be visiting in Montana courthouses with county commissioners and the citizens of the state about the management of our national forests and how it relates to roadless areas.

Sincerely,

Brian Schweitzer
Governor of the State of Montana

Cc: Mike Johanns, Secretary of Agriculture
Mark Rey, Undersecretary of Agriculture
Gale Norton, Secretary of the Interior
Senator Max Baucus
Senator Conrad Burns
Congressman Denny Rehberg
Abigail Kimbell, Northern Regional Forester