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Schweitzer focuses roadless-area meeting on existing roads only

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Gov. Brian Schweitzer has until next November to get back to the Bush administration with his suggestions for dealing with Montana's 6.3 million roadless acres. But a meeting with county commissioners from Western Montana on Monday hinted that the gist of his message will be brief:

No new roads.

Although, even Schweitzer won't put it quite that bluntly. He just told the commissioners that the only thing he wanted to hear from them was specific suggestions about specific roads, and when none were forthcoming, said there appeared to be a consensus to stick with the existing roads.

"That kind of put a period at the end of the sentence," said Tom Lythgoe, a Jefferson County commissioner.

The issue dates to earlier this year, when the Bush administration reversed a 2001 ban on development in remote national forests, then told governors they could, if they wanted, send in suggestions tailored to their particular states.

Schweitzer tossed the matter to the counties, demanding that they submit their plans to him by Jan. 1, and following up on that request by traveling to the counties to review the issue.

Apparently, many of the commissioners missed the part where they weren't really supposed to consider any new roads. Some tried to do just that Monday, raising the possibility of redefining "roadless" boundaries to reflect the reality that several of those areas actually are criss-crossed by everything from informal ATV tracks to roads with \$300 metal highway signs.

Not my issue, Schweitzer shrugged. Tell it to the Forest Service.

"The wider discussion of determining what's a road — I can't possibly be involved in that," he said. "Let's maintain the roads we already have. That's where I come down on this," he said, as his border collie, Jag, wove in and out among commissioners' legs beneath the massive conference table.

Part of the problem, said Schweitzer, is that the Forest Service only gets about a third of the money it says it needs to maintain existing roads. Under the circumstances, said Schweitzer, it would be foolhardy to even think about new roads.

Commissioners pointed out that the state and counties don't do much better when it comes to maintaining their own roads, though.

Schweitzer relented on a couple of points. He extended the commissioners' deadline for their plans until March 1. And he agreed that his suggestion to the president should insist upon flexibility to build roads in the remote areas for, say, fire prevention.

Alan Thompson, a Ravalli County commissioner, pointed out that the county's economy has shifted from timber to tourism. Tourists need the roads as much as loggers once did, to reach the wilderness for recreation, he said.

He, for one, read the governor loud and clear.

"None of us are talking about new roads," he said.

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