

October 26, 2005

Dear Commissioners,

My thanks to all of you for taking time out of your busy schedules over the past year to meet with me. My pledge upon taking office was to visit all 56 county courthouses, and as of last count, there are 19 more I look forward to visiting. For those of you with whom I have not yet met, please know that I intend to do so by years' end to discuss issues of importance to you.

In particular, this letter is to follow up my recent meetings with county commissioners about the opportunity to petition the US Department of Agriculture regarding the status of roadless Forest Service lands in Montana. I have asked for your assistance because, as commissioners, you are familiar with roads, including matters of cost of construction, maintenance, traffic management, weed control, and other fiscal impacts.

As a practical matter, the Forest Service in Montana reports a \$588 million backlog of existing forest roads in disrepair. Building new roads into backcountry areas would add more cost, and at this time I strongly believe adequate federal dollars should be available to fund forest management, forest and stream restoration, and existing trail and road maintenance. With proper management, currently roaded forest lands can supply the logs necessary to keep Montana's mills running, and help sustain our rural communities across the state.

But the focus of the current process is roadless public lands. In response to the request from the Bush Administration for petitions from governors on the future of their states' respective roadless areas, I have been traveling to county courthouses to lay out a process to answer this request.

Specifically, I am asking all county commissions with roadless public lands within their boundaries to carefully assess this central issue: whether or not any new federal roads are needed in their county on existing roadless National Forest lands. If commissioners believe new roads are necessary, I have asked that they submit their proposal to me no later than January 1, 2006.

It appears that some commissioners intend to take full advantage of this opportunity for input, while others are comfortable working within ongoing

forest planning processes. For those who choose to submit a new road recommendation, I ask that it be specific in nature. The rationale for any new road proposal should be objective, and begin with a clear statement of need. Each proposal should include a thorough analysis of the expected environmental impacts, the projected cost of building and maintaining the road, who will bear those costs, and an accounting of community support. I'm certain that local Forest Service offices will be a valuable resource for helping to gather this information.

Much of the roadless debate for over 30 years has amounted to philosophy, even theology, about how the Forest Service manages its 16.9 million acres of public lands in Montana. These tired arguments have gotten us nowhere. By keeping proposals specific to Montana's backcountry roadless lands and avoiding the temptation to re-hash the management of the lands where we have built roads, I hope to focus our efforts on the administration's current request. As you know, other forest management issues falls within the scope of ongoing forest plan revision processes.

I understand that there are portions of some inventoried roadless areas where forest fuel accumulation may need to be reduced to protect homes and municipal drinking water sources, especially in urban interface areas. In this case, management to reduce fuel accumulations is an important consideration, and I plan to request the flexibility to do so.

As a next step, I invite you to participate in a discussion with commissioners from other affected counties here in Helena on November 28. We will meet in the Governor's reception room on the second floor of the state capitol at 10:00 a.m. This meeting will provide all of us a chance to share ideas and information, and allow you to have a discussion about how the US Forest Service, state, and other counties are approaching this opportunity. Additionally, county lines, watersheds, and hunting districts don't follow public land boundaries, and your recommendations may involve coordination and cooperation with other counties, the state, or tribal governments.

I thank you for your time concerning this important issue and look forward to seeing you on the 28th. Please contact my office with questions or concerns.

With best regards,

Governor Brian Schweitzer