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COLORADO CONSERVATIONISTS HAIL FOREST SERVICE ROADLESS AREA PROTECTION POLICY

In a move hailed by Colorado conservationists, the Forest Service today adopted a final rule that will bar commercial logging from 4.4 million acres of National Forest lands in Colorado, thus freeing these lands from destructive practices which have harmed recreation, water quality, and wildlife habitat while costing taxpayers millions.

The policy would not limit commercial logging on 10,000 square miles of other National Forest lands in Colorado - an area substantially larger than the entire State of Massachusetts. Logging to restore natural fire regimes and habitat for rare wildlife would continue to be permitted in roadless areas.

The policy would not close existing roads, motorized trails, or other trails on Forest lands. Existing oil and gas leases would be honored.

"This is a great day for the millions of Coloradans who value our forests for open space, for pure water, for wildlife, for recreation, for our quality of life, and for our children," said Ted Zukoski, staff attorney for the Boulder-based Land and Water Fund, a non-profit conservation law firm. "More than a dozen hearings were held in Colorado, and thousands of Coloradans asked the Forest Service to protect these at-risk, critical areas. As sprawl and development consume 90,000 acres of Colorado open space a year, our need to protect these last wild places has become ever greater."

The final rule almost certainly means that a number of timber sales in Colorado will be shelved or will have to be significantly modified before going forward. Such sales include the Sheep Flats timber sale on the Grand Mesa National Forest, the Zephyr timber sale on the Routt National Forest, and the Dome Peak timber sale on the White River National Forest.

In addition, the rule will likely require the Forest Service to undertake a full environmental impact statement (EIS) for the giant Upper South Platte project on the Pike-San Isabel National Forest. While billed as a "restoration project," it would include 4,400 acres of clearcuts and logging in several roadless areas. The Forest Service had refused to undertake a comprehensive EIS, despite requests from Congressman Mark Udall, dozens of citizens, and criticism of its lower level environmental "assessment" by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Conservation groups from around Colorado hailed the new rule.

"This bold action provides long overdue recognition of the vital role that roadless areas play in maintaining our forest ecosystems," said Richard Compton, the Aspen Wilderness Workshop's Roadless Area Inventory Coordinator. "Most visitors to the White River National Forest don't realize how much of the wild country they enjoy is in roadless areas that could be roaded, ripped up, and logged, destroying not just the forest's ecological value but the scenic and quiet recreational values so important to visitors."

Jean Smith, of the Upper Arkansas & South Platte Project, echoed Compton's support. "The new policy is a great step forward in protecting the Pike and San Isabel National Forests," said Ms. Smith. "Remnants of ponderosa pine, which was extensively logged in past years, and other low elevation wildlife habitat will escape the timber saw and new roads. Some of these roadless areas are located along the South Platte River corridor. Aspen Ridge and Badger Creek near Salida and Tanner Peak near Canon City are giant stepping stones for wildlife along the Arkansas River, acting as havens and corridors for elk and bighorn sheep, among other animals. Many of the higher elevation roadless areas are the sources of domestic water supply for much of the metropolitan area, a definite boon for future water quality."

"This is probably the single most important public lands action to protect the Gunnison National Forest in decades," said Sandy Shea, Executive Director of High Country Citizens' Alliance in Crested Butte. "It's also a tremendous boon to the Grand Mesa National Forest - the only Forest in Colorado with no protected wildlands of any kind."

Suzanne Jones, Assistant Regional Director for The Wilderness Society, noted that the decision would have a positive impact on Colorado's economy and quality of life. "Colorado's economy is increasingly tied to recreation and tourism. No one comes here to see clearcuts and smell sulfurous gas wells. It's our beautiful scenery, outdoor amenities, and active lifestyle that lure high-tech and other companies here. The Forest Service's action will protect those values and make Colorado an even more attractive place to do business."

Rocky Smith, Forest Watch Coordinator for Durango-based Colorado Wild, noted that the impact of protecting these remote areas on logging and oil and gas business would be minimal. "There's a reason these places are roadless, and it's because the oil and gas industry and timber companies haven't found it cost-effective to punch roads in to these rugged areas for the last century. The Forest Service's analysis shows that no more than 2 percent of the nation's untapped natural gas reserves are within protected roadless areas." Forest Service studies also show that only about 1% of total US production of petroleum products comes from all National Forest lands.

The timber industry in Colorado represents less than 1% of all employment in the State outside of the Denver metro area. In addition, taxpayers have historically lost money on Forest Service timber sales here. "Colorado is just not a good place to grow timber with our short growing season," said Rocky Smith. Smith also noted that nationally 99.5% of all timber products come from lands other than Forest Service roadless areas.