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STATEMENT OF MIKE DOMBECK, CHIEF, USDA FOREST SERVICE

Before the Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health, U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Resources

Concerning the Forest Service Proposed Roads Policy

Wednesday, February 25, 1998

MADAM CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

Thank you for the opportunity to join you today to discuss the National Forest transportation system. What I have proposed is essentially a "time-out" on road building in roadless areas during which Congress, the Administration, and the American people can engage in a dialogue about when and where roads will be built in our National Forests. We are going to develop a science-based forest transportation system that meets the needs of local people while minimizing, and reversing the adverse environmental effects erosion, landslides, and degradation of wildlife habitat and water quality roads often cause.

Let me outline my key objectives in developing this new policy. My first objective is to provide Forest Service managers with new scientific and analytical tools to make better, more informed decisions about when, where, and if new roads should be constructed. Second, we need to move quickly to decommission unnecessary and unused roads, as well as unplanned and unauthorized "ghost roads." Third, we intend to improve forest roads, where appropriate, to respond to changing demands, local communities' access needs, and the growing recreation use of the National Forest System.

This policy review is critical so we can focus our limited resources on the roads most in need. Finally, we intend to develop a road policy that allows us to "catch up" on our enormous backlog in road maintenance and reconstruction while meeting management objectives and access needs.

Roads Leave a Lasting Impact

The road network on the National Forest System is extensive and diverse. Many roads are essential for the active management of National Forest resources and provide many and varied benefits. They are critical to timber harvest, mineral extraction, livestock grazing and recreation access. They provide important access for fire control, law enforcement, search and rescue, wildlife habitat improvement, and research and monitoring. There is no question that the road network on our National Forest System serves, and will continue to serve, as a fundamental component for delivery of multiple use programs.

The simple fact is that the road system we have today is tremendously larger than what we can afford. Current funding is not sufficient to maintain all roads to the safety and environmental standards to which they were built. For example, we can only maintain 40 percent of the 373,000 miles to designated standards.

Building a road requires a short-term investment of revenue. Its maintenance over time, however, is a long-term financial commitment. The cost of delaying timely maintenance and reconstruction increases exponentially over time. For example, in Idaho, the road to Riverside Campground on the Targhee National Forest could have been chip-sealed a few years ago for about \$22,000. Today it will cost more than \$110,000. To reconstruct about five miles of Scout Mountain Road on the Caribou National Forest will cost \$1.4 million. We could have preserved most of our investment by spending \$100,000 five years ago.

In addition to the 373,000 miles of inventoried forest system roads, the Forest Service estimates that there are approximately 60,000 miles of roads that have been created by repeated use - we call them "ghost roads" - that are not managed or maintained by the agency as part of the forest road system.

While forest roads provide many benefits, they can also cause serious environmental damage. While new developments in road building technology result in fewer negative environmental effects, the environmental effects from existing roads are more extensive than previously thought. Road construction may cause increased frequency of flooding and landslides, and increased stream sedimentation, with associated reductions in aquatic habitat productivity and water quality. Roads may

also fragment and degrade habitat for some wildlife species. Research indicates that roading may begin or accelerate the invasion of exotic plant species that ultimately displace native species and diminish the productivity of the land.

Public use of and demands on national forest resources have shifted considerably during the past 10 years. While there has been a decrease in timber harvesting and other commodity uses we have seen steadily increasing growth in the amount and type of recreation uses. Currently, more than 90 percent of the traffic using Forest Service roads is recreation-related. With this shift in public use has come changes in user expectations and access needs, requiring new approaches to decide which roads to close or leave open, and the appropriate standard and configuration of these roads.

Shifts in Resource Demands

The Forest Service must thoroughly review its road management policy and develop a comprehensive science-based policy for the future. This policy must be based on the changing resource demands and public use, coupled with the need to ensure that decisions on road building and maintenance are grounded in the best scientific information available. With these policies and procedures firmly established, local managers can decide where and how individual roads should be managed working with local people. The Forest Service needs to balance scientific information, public needs, and funding levels when determining the size, purpose, and extent of the future forest road transportation system.

An essential element of this comprehensive overhaul of forest road policy is to develop improved analytical tools for land managers and resource specialists. To that end, agency researchers and specialists will develop an improved analysis process based on science and public involvement that ensures the ecological, social, and economic impacts of proposed construction and reconstruction of National Forest System roads are objectively evaluated, and that public demand on National Forest System roads is fully considered in the context of current scientific information. This analytical process will undergo an independent technical and scientific peer review before adoption.

This analytical process will not directly result in any land use changes that require amendments to land use plans for the National Forests. However, this process will be applied locally to determine where, when, and how roads will be constructed, reconstructed, or decommissioned.

Making Better Use with Limited Funds

In the last two decades, public interest in, and scrutiny of, the forest road system have increased dramatically. At the same time, resource uses on the national forests have shifted. It is our obligation as stewards of the public trust to consider adjustments in the management of the forest road system to respond to these changes and to better serve present and future management objectives in a more efficient manner. The existing road system on National Forest System lands was largely funded through the timber program and constructed to develop areas for timber harvesting and, to a lesser extent, for the development of other resources. Over the last decade, the timber program has been reduced significantly, resulting in less money being generated for road reconstruction and maintenance. We do not expect timber harvest levels to return to pre-1990 levels because of our more broad-based approach to forest management. Therefore, the Forest Service must identify sustainable funding sources for maintaining the forest road system in an environmentally sensitive manner that best meets the needs of local communities, other users, and visitors to the National Forest System. In the President's FY 1999 budget we have begun to direct more funding to maintain and decommission roads. We will do so in a public forum where all interests can be heard.

In the Federal Register of January 28, 1998, the Forest Service provided advance notice of its intention to overhaul its road policies, and to change how the road system is developed, used, maintained, and funded. As part of this notice, the Forest Service proposed to temporarily suspend road construction and reconstruction in most unroaded areas of the National Forest System. This proposed temporary suspension would expire upon the application of the new and improved analysis tools or 18 months, whichever is sooner. The Forest Service is seeking public comment on both the proposed interim rule to temporarily suspend road construction/reconstruction in unroaded areas and the way the Forest Service road system is developed, used, and funded.

The deadline for public comment on the proposed interim rule was February 27, 1998. As a result of early public and Congressional comment, we intend to extend the comment period on the interim rule another 30 days. We also will hold a series of public forums across the nation to assure full public participation in the roads policy revision. As of February 20, 1998, we have received 2,450 comments on both the interim rule and the Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, as well as opinions on road management. I ask that copies of the two Federal Register notices be placed in the record along with

my statement.

Effects of the Proposed Road Policy

Under the proposed interim rule, a limited number of planned land management projects that depend on new road construction, such as timber sales, may not be implemented in the timeframe currently planned. During the interim period, some projects may proceed in an altered form, and some may be postponed until such time as the road assessment process is implemented. I want to emphasize that only new road construction or reconstruction within roadless areas is affected by our proposal. Other needed forest management activities, such as thinning, helicopter logging, and prescribed fire could continue so long as they do not require new road construction .

It is difficult to estimate with precision the costs and benefits associated with deferring projects due to considerable variation in site-specific factors. For instance; some projects are in various stages of development and planning and analysis often take longer to complete than originally anticipated. Some project work can be shifted to other sites outside unroaded areas.

Although the precise amounts are difficult to estimate, our initial analysis indicates that a minimal amount of timber volume offered would be affected, which may lead to a small reduction in payments to states. It is expected that timber sales in the Intermountain and Northern Regions of the National Forest System be affected more from the suspension than other geographic regions of the country, such as California, because of a higher reliance on unroaded areas for timber production in these regions.

While the delay in some projects may have some adverse economic impact in the short term, these impacts are offset by the benefits gained from the temporary suspension of road construction and reconstruction in the long term. The environmental benefits gained will assure critically important water quality in the headwater streams that are found in many of the unroaded areas. The development of a new road analysis process also would allow proposed and future projects requiring road construction to reflect current scientific information and resource use trends. This will help managers and the public better understand the consequences of locating and building roads in unroaded areas.

As to how this proposal can affect the payments to states program, you should be aware that in its 1999 budget, the Administration has proposed providing predictable, reliable payments to states based on a formula similar to one now used for counties under the Pacific Northwest Forest Plan. We believe it is far more preferable for counties to have predictable payments rather than being affected by fluctuations in timber demand and supply from our National Forests.

Summary

Madam Chairman, the Forest Service shares your concern for a transportation system that meets the needs of rural American. The Forest Service recognizes the need for a science-based process that enables us to manage our transportation system in a manner that minimizes - and in some cases reverses - environmental impacts that degrade wildlife habitat and water quality. Roads leave a lasting imprint on the landscape. What I have proposed is essentially a "time-out" on road building in many unroaded areas until Congress, the Administration, and the American people can engage in a constructive dialogue about when and where roads will be built in our National Forests. This hearing, together with the public comments on the proposed regulatory changes, is part of that dialogue.

That concludes my testimony Madam Chairman. I will be pleased to answer any questions the Subcommittee may have.

Submitted by: Alan Polk

2/25/98