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Natural Resources

Forest Service Impact Study Would Designate 5.7 Million Acres for Road Building in Idaho

An alternative plan to manage 9.3 million acres of roadless lands in Idaho favored by the U.S. Forest Service would allow logging and road building on 5.7 million acres, according to a final environmental impact statement released Aug. 29.

That is slightly less than the 5.9 million acres the state wanted open for exploitation when Idaho petitioned the Forest Service in 2006 to manage its roadless areas.

The impact statement, *Roadless Area Conservation: National Forest System Lands in Idaho*, examined Idaho's proposed approach as well as three alternative management plans.

The Forest Service developed its preferred alternative based on public comments.

Alternative Would Protect, Open Land

The state's roadless areas are divided into five categories or themes, with differing levels of protection.

Under the Forest Service's preferred plan, 5.3 million acres would be classified as backcountry land, open for some logging and road building, while an additional 405,900 acres would be deemed general forest, rangeland, and grassland, an even less restrictive category.

The preferred plan would designate 3.2 million acres as wild land recreation and primitive areas, two of the most protective categories. Road construction, mining, and timber harvesting are generally prohibited in both wild land recreation and primitive areas except under very controlled circumstances, according to the Forest Service.

The state had wanted 5.3 million acres classified as backcountry land and 609,600 acres designated as general forest, rangeland, and grasslands. Its approach would have designated slightly more than 3 million acres as wild land recreation and primitive areas.

The Forest Service's proposed alternative would also allow 11 fewer miles of roadway to be built in the protected areas over 15 years than in Idaho's proposal and 3,000 fewer acres of timber to be harvested over the same time frame.

Idaho Governor Led Effort

Then-Idaho Gov. James E. Risch (R), now that state's lieutenant governor, petitioned the Forest Service to open up 5.9 million acres of land deemed roadless for logging in 2006.

The Forest Service in May 2005 overturned a Clinton administration roadless rule, thereby allowing states to petition the government to open some of those areas to development, but the rule was reinstated by a federal judge in September 2006 (*California v. U.S. Department of Agriculture*, N.D. Cal., No. 05-3508, 9/20/06; 183 DEN A-2, 9/21/06).

However, the Forest Service still can consider petitions from governors under the federal Administrative Procedure Act to change how their forest lands are managed.

The Forest Service published a proposed rule Jan. 7 concerning Idaho roadless areas that drew on a draft environmental impact statement released that same month.

The proposed rule would allow for road building in those backcountry areas of Idaho when "a road is needed to protect public health and safety in cases of significant risk or imminent threat of flood, wildland fire, or other catastrophic event that, without intervention, would cause the loss of life or property; or to facilitate forest health activities" (73 Fed. Reg. 1135; 8 DEN A-4, 1/14/08).

Risch praised the roadless lands management process in an Aug. 29 statement as "a model for resolving difficult natural resource issues in the future."

While the Pew Environment Group decried the updated impact statement's conclusions as "giving the logging and mining industries the keys to Idaho's most pristine national forests," the Idaho Conservation League supports the report, Senior Conservation Associate Jonathan Oppenheimer told BNA Sept. 2.

"When we look at it, on balance, we feel the [assessment] is protective of Idaho's back country and we are supportive of it," he said.

The draft environmental impact statement released in January had identified Idaho's plan as the preferred alternative (1 DEN A-7, 1/3/08).

The U.S. Forest Service's final environmental impact statement on Idaho's roadless areas is available at <http://roadless.fs.fed.us/idaho.shtml>.

By Andrew Childers