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Aug. 3, 2004

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Proposed Change in Federal Roadless Rule Threatens 45,000 acres in White Mountain National Forest

The Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC) strongly opposes a recent federal proposal that puts millions of acres of wild lands across the nation at risk of road-building, oil and gas drilling, and commercial logging, representatives of the conservation and recreation organization announced recently.

The proposal, announced July 12 by U.S. Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman, affects the so-called Roadless Rule, originally implemented in 2001 to permanently protect nearly 60 million acres of roadless national forest lands from activities that would diminish their wild character.

About 45,000 acres of the White Mountain National Forest in New Hampshire and Maine that were protected under the original Roadless Rule would be put at risk of road-building and commercial timber harvesting if the new proposal is adopted.

According to AMC's ongoing research of roadless areas, the White Mountain National Forest contains about one-quarter of the roadless acreage remaining in Northern New England, and includes four of the five largest remaining roadless areas in the region. The roadless areas impacted by the proposal buffer popular recreational areas such as the Pemigewasset, Sandwich Range and Wild River areas.

The White Mountain National Forest is a national recreation and conservation resource that sees nearly 7 million visitors a year—more than the number of people who visit Yellowstone and Yosemite national parks annually.

“Some may think management of roadless areas is strictly an issue of concern in the Western United States, but that is clearly not the case,” said Susan Arnold, director of conservation for the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC). “Some of the most spectacular, wild places in the White Mountain National Forest that had been designated for ecological protection under the original Roadless Rule will now be at risk of commercial timber harvesting and road-building.”

Rather than continue federal oversight of roadless areas with a strong public input process, the proposed rules change turns the current rule on its head by requiring

governors to petition the U.S. Forest Service if they wish to protect roadless areas on national forests in their states.

In the absence of a state petition, decisions about roadless area management will revert to individual forest plans. It was because these plans did not provide adequate protection to roadless areas that the original rule was instituted.

There is strong public support for the original Roadless Rule, which recognized the importance of protecting large, undeveloped tracts of national forest land from road building, oil and gas drilling, and logging. The Forest Service received more than 1.6 million comments in response to the original roadless area proposal, with more than 95 percent supporting the strongest possible protections for remaining roadless areas across the nation.

More than 90 percent of the comments received as part of a local planning process on the White Mountain National Forest supported additional protections for roadless areas on that forest.

Even if governors were to request the continuation of roadless area protections, the proposed rule provides no guarantee that the government will protect inventoried roadless areas--potentially opening up millions of acres of national forest land to road-building and other activities that diminish their wild, remote character.

“National forests are national treasures, and all citizens should have the opportunity to participate in the public process that determines the future of these precious lands. Their management—including the management of roadless areas—should continue to be overseen by the Forest Service, which has traditionally coupled scientific management techniques with citizen input,” said Arnold.

“The Appalachian Mountain Club was one of the strongest voices in support of the creation of the White Mountain National Forest with the passage of the Weeks Act in 1911. We continue to play an active role in managing recreational use, maintaining trails, and providing information and other services to hundreds of thousands of visitors who come to the national forest each year to enjoy some of the most spectacular landscapes in the nation,” said AMC Deputy Director Walter Graff. “Important natural areas, which include critical wildlife habitat, important recreational lands, and mature forests will be at risk if this proposal is enacted.”

“Private lands surrounding the forest are changing, due to the pressures of increasing population, development, road-building, ownership fragmentation, and increasingly intensive timber harvesting. As public land, the White Mountain National Forest is uniquely suited for the maintenance of large, roadless areas that can remain wild, and that can benefit future generations,” Arnold said

Roadless areas often surround and provide additional protection to existing Wilderness areas, keeping a larger, unfragmented ecosystem intact. Four of the five largest roadless

areas in northern New England—the Pemigewasset, Wild River, Sandwich Range, and Presidential-Dry River areas--are within the White Mountain National Forest.

“These and other roadless areas are some of the last, best wild places in the Northeast,” said Arnold. “While the AMC supports sustainable timber management on appropriate parts of our national forests, we believe that maintaining large, wild areas should be a higher priority. They provide the best opportunity for restoring extensive old forest habitat which is very rare in our region, but critical to conserving our biological heritage.”

The AMC called for the protection of large, roadless areas in the WMNF even before the national Roadless Rule was issued. In 1999, the AMC, along with the Wilderness Society and the Conservation Law Foundation, released the *Mountain Treasures* report, which cited the need for the conservation of important roadless areas in the WMNF.

“The AMC is working through both the national rule-making process and the forest plan revision process to ensure the protection of additional roadless areas and Wilderness areas in the White Mountain National Forest,” Graff said.

The draft Environmental Impact Statement for the forest plan is due to be released by the Forest Service next month. A public comment period will follow.

The AMC encourages citizens to submit comments on the proposed change in the Roadless Rule by writing to the U.S. Forest Service at statepetitionroadless@fs.fed.us. Comments are due by Sept. 13. The public is also encouraged to join AMC’s Conservation Action Network to monitor progress on the Roadless Rule and the WMNF Forest Plan. More information is available at www.outdoors.org/conservation.

Founded in 1876, the Appalachian Mountain Club is the oldest and most experienced conservation and recreation organization in the United States. With more than 90,000 members in the Northeast and beyond, the nonprofit AMC promotes the protection, enjoyment, and wise use of the mountains, rivers and trails of the Appalachian region.