

President George W. Bush*
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

December 18, 2003

Dear Mr. President:

As professional economists and federal taxpayers, we would like to express our concern about the lack of fiscal and performance accountability of the U.S. Forest Service. A June 2003, Government Accounting Office (GAO) report found that the Forest Service “has not been able to provide Congress or the public with a clear understanding of what the Forest Service’s 30,000 employees accomplish with the approximately \$5 billion the agency receives every year.”ⁱ

A recent Program Assessment and Rating Tool (PART) review by the White House Office of Management and Budget found that the Forest Service “has been unable to demonstrate that it can maintain its current infrastructure needs.”ⁱⁱ One area where this problem is abundantly clear is within the National Forest Road System. Over 240 million people visit the National Forests each year, yet eighty-percent of 382,000-mile national forest road network is currently closed to passenger cars.ⁱⁱⁱ

The failure to properly maintain the vast national forest road system has resulted in an estimated \$10 billion backlog for deferred maintenance and capital improvement needs.^{iv} Prioritizing road system expenditures toward existing infrastructure, rather than commissioning the construction of new roads will help reduce this taxpayer burden, improve the quality of road infrastructure, and increase public access to existing forest roads. What the U.S. Forest Service needs is “a few good roads” not more miles of poorly maintained roads that cost taxpayer dollars, add sediment to streams, fragment wildlife habitat, and displace non-motorized recreation such as hiking and mountain biking.

Support of the Roadless Area Conservation Rule would help bring the \$10 billion backlog for deferred maintenance and capital improvement needs under control, while limiting taxpayer losses through the commercial timber program. Keeping these Roadless Areas intact will provide long-term economic benefits to current and future generations of Americans through clean water, fisheries, wildlife and opportunities for non-motorized recreation that contributes to improved physical fitness of our citizens.

As citizens who understand the intrinsic and economic value of our national forests, we urge you to make fiscal and performance accountability a priority for the U.S. Forest Service by supporting the Roadless Areas Conservation Rule. Such support will increase the likelihood that the U.S. Forest Service can maintain existing open roads in good working order at a reasonable cost to the U.S. taxpayer. Opening new roads into currently unroaded areas would result in increased road maintenance costs, as well as fragmentation of wildlife habitat, increased stream sedimentation, and displacement of non-motorized recreation. All of these have substantial costs to our economy in terms of reduced hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing and non-motorized recreation.

Sincerely,

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**Note: This letter will also be distributed to members of Congress.*

*** Affiliations are not meant to imply institutional endorsement.*

ⁱ U.S. Government Accounting Office, *FOREST SERVICE: Little Progress on Performance Accountability Likely Unless Management Addresses Key Challenges*, A report to the Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health, Committee on Resources, House of Representatives, May 2003, GAO-03-503, p. 1.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ USDA Forest Service, *FY 2004 USDA Forest Service Budget Justification*, p. 8-2.

^{iv} Ibid.