

Obama moves to curb road-building in forests

May 29 2009, By MATTHEW DALY , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- The Obama administration is ordering a one-year moratorium on most road-building and other development on about 50 million acres of remote national forests.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack issued a directive Thursday reinstating for one year most of a Clinton-era ban against new road construction and development in national forests. The 2001 rule banned road-building and logging in more than 58 million acres of remote national forests, mostly in the West.

Conflicting court decisions issued since then have left the so-called roadless rule's legal status in doubt.

Environmental groups consider the road ban crucial since road-building is often the first step toward logging, drilling, mining and other development in the forest backcountry. Critics of the ban say roads are needed to fight wildfires and log small trees that otherwise could serve as fuel for catastrophic fires.

Vilsack said his interim directive - which takes effect immediately - will provide clarity that should help protect national forests until the Obama administration develops a long-term roadless policy. The directive gives Vilsack sole decision-making authority over all proposed forest management or road construction projects in designated roadless areas in all states except Idaho. A spokeswoman for Vilsack, Chris Mather, said that the secretary could still approve roads if necessary, for example, to

protect public safety or forest health.

Idaho was one of two states that developed its own roadless rule under a Bush administration policy giving states more control over whether and how to block road-building in remote forests. More than 9 million acres of roadless national forests in Idaho will remain under state control, Vilsack said.

Colorado was the only other state to write its own roadless plan. The state has been working with the [Forest Service](#) to clarify language and hoped to complete work in the next few months on a plan to protect more than 4 million acres of roadless national forests.

The federal directive takes precedence over the state's efforts for now, Mather said.

But Colorado Gov. Bill Ritter said the state will continue to work on its roadless plan. Ritter, a Democrat, said Colorado's roadless rule is "consistent with the objectives of the Obama administration, and therefore I look forward to continuing to work with the secretary as we finalize the Colorado rule in the coming months."

Rick Cables, head of the regional Forest Service office in Denver, said Vilsack's announcement was not intended to stop Colorado's process. The regional office will continue working with Colorado on the plan, Cables said, adding that any plan the state submits will need Vilsack's approval.

Confusion over the roadless rule extended beyond Colorado and Idaho.

In alternately upholding and overturning portions of the 2001 Clinton rule, federal courts "have created confusion and made it difficult for the U.S. Forest Service to do its job," Vilsack said in a statement. The new

directive will ensure that the administration can consider activities in the affected areas while long-term roadless policy is developed and court cases move forward, he said.

The directive's most immediate effect is to halt plans for road construction in the Tongass National Forest in Alaska. About 35 miles of roads are proposed as part of several timber sales pending in the Tongass, the nation's largest federal forest.

Obama's proposed "time out" is "needed and welcome," said Trip Van Noppen, president of the environmental group Earthjustice. "Roadless areas are important as the last remaining pristine areas in America, and they are a great bulwark in how we will protect our environment in an era of climate change."

Rep. Nick Rahall, D-W.Va., chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, hailed the announcement as proof that the Obama administration intends to turn away from the Bush administration's forest policy, which he described as "chopping away at the health and future of America's forests."

Rahall was one of more than 120 House members who sent a letter to Vilsack in March urging the one-year moratorium. Twenty-five senators sent a similar letter.

Kristen Boyles, an Earthjustice lawyer who has fought to uphold the roadless rule, said the rule has been remarkably effective despite repeated court challenges by industry groups and attempts by the Bush administration to weaken it. Only seven miles of road have been built in national forests since the rule took effect in 2001, Boyles said. In Alaska, four miles were built for salvage logging after a wildfire, and three miles were built for a phosphate mine in Idaho.

"Despite numerous attempts to undermine the roadless rule, America's pristine roadless areas remain almost completely intact," Boyles said.

On the Net

Forest Service: <http://www.fs.fed.us>

Pew Environment Group forests campaign: <http://www.ourforests.org/>

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Citation: Obama moves to curb road-building in forests (2009, May 29) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-05-obama-curb-road-building-forests.html>

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