FINAL

# STATEMENT OF
# MIKE DOMBECK, CHIEF
# FOREST SERVICE
# UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

## Before the

## Committee on Resources
## United States House of Representatives

## Regarding the Promulgation of Regulations Concerning Roadless Areas Within the National Forest System

**November 3, 1999**

MISTER CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss Forest Service efforts to develop long-term protections for the important social and ecological values of roadless areas within the National Forest System. As you know, on October 19, 1999, we published a Notice of Intent in the Federal Register that outlined a two part process to: 1) limit certain development activities such as road construction in inventoried roadless areas and 2) identify the values that make roadless areas of all sizes ecologically and socially important. At the direction of the President of the United States, the Forest Service has begun a public dialogue. We have no proposal yet. There is no preferred alternative. We have begun a very open and public dialogue with the American people about how they want their remaining, unfragmented, public lands to be managed.

Mr. Chairman, although we formally began our process on October 13, 1999, with

the President's visit to the spectacular Little River roadless area on the George Washington National Forest, this is not an issue that just came up recently.

Roadless areas are controversial, in part, because of their important social and ecological values. Roadless areas provide clean water, habitat for wildlife, food for hunters, and amazing recreational opportunities. They act as a barrier against noxious invasive plant and animal species and as strongholds for native fish populations. Roadless areas serve as reference areas for research and often provide vital habitat and migration routes for numerous wildlife species and are particularly important for those requiring large home ranges. Many roadless areas also act as ecological anchors allowing nearby federal, state, and private lands to be developed for economic purposes. Indeed, roadless areas are critically important for the long-term ecological sustainability of the nation's forests.

In recent years, the public has rightfully questioned whether the Forest Service should build new roads into controversial roadless areas when the agency has difficulty maintaining its existing road system. The current national forest road system includes 380,000 miles of roads, enough to circle the globe more than 15 times. The agency currently has a road reconstruction and maintenance backlog of approximately $8.4 billion and it receives only about 20 percent of the annual funding needed to maintain the safety and environmental condition of its road system.

Almost two years ago, during my first Appropriations season as Chief, I watched as the House of Representatives came within a single vote of cutting $42 million out of Forest Service roads budget because of these issues.

On January 28, 1998, I initiated a process to consider changes in how the Forest Service road system is developed, used, maintained, and funded and to suspend temporarily road construction and reconstruction in certain unroaded areas. This

effort lead to the current "interim rule", that has temporarily suspended road construction and reconstruction in unroaded areas. The agency has received more than 80,000 public comments on these efforts, the majority of which called for a permanent halt to road building in roadless areas.

In response to these comments and the President's October directive, the agency is following a two track process: the first dealing with roadless areas and the second dealing with the existing Forest Service road system.

The Forest Service published a Notice of Intent on October 19, 1999, to initiate the scoping process whereby the Forest Service solicits public comment on the nature and scope of the environmental, social and economic issues related to roadless areas. The public has been asked to provide comments by December 20, 1999. The agency is planning to publish a draft environmental impact statement (EIS) and proposed rule for public review in the spring of 2000. The final EIS and final rule will be published in the fall of 2000.

In terms of the Forest Service's existing road network, the Forest Service will also publish a proposed long-term roads policy in the next several weeks that will enable the agency to better manage the roads it already has.

Indeed, as we work on the rulemaking process for roadless areas, we will continue to work on the long term roads management policy. There will be some overlap as we pursue these two separate but closely related actions.

Because both of these processes are so important to the American people and local communities, we will be holding a series of public meetings across the country, including public meetings on every National Forest that has inventoried roadless areas.

Background

Roadless areas have been an issue for public land management for a long time. They became a national issue when the agency conducted the Roadless Area Review and Evaluation (RARE) almost 30 years ago, following passage of the Wilderness Act. Immediate criticism of the study prompted a lawsuit regarding the study's comprehensiveness. Thus began the cycle of controversy and litigation that took us through the RARE II process in the late 1970's and through 20 years of forest plans and project implementation.

For too long, others, such as the court system and interest groups, have controlled the debate over long-term management of roadless areas. The President's direction puts this issue squarely back where it belongs, into the hands of the American people and the resource professionals of the Forest Service.

The Forest Service already has over 380,000 miles of classified roads yet, we receive less than 20% of the funding needed to maintain them to safety and environmental standards. As a result, our backlog of reconstruction and maintenance now exceeds $8.4 billion.

Road construction may increase the risk of erosion, landslides, and slope failure, endangering the health of watersheds that provide drinking water to local communities and critical habitat for fish and wildlife. Development in these roadless areas can allow entry of invasive plants and animals that threaten the health of native species, increase human-caused wildfire, disrupt habitat connectivity, and otherwise compromise the attributes that make these sensitive areas socially valuable and ecologically important.

People have also expressed concerns about losing the potential economic values some of the roadless areas could provide through timber harvest and mineral development. Other concerns revolve around limiting treatments that may improve

the health of the forests and reduce the accumulation of hazardous fuels. For all these reasons, it is important that we hear from the public about the value and importance they place on these areas.

## SUMMARY

As the impacts of population expansion and land development spread out across the American landscape, the last vestiges of wildness, the roadless areas, hang in the balance. We do not want these lands to become museum pieces. We do not want to block people's access to the forests they love. Where else in the world can you find 192 million acres without a single no trespassing sign? Our objective is to ensure that our grandchildren will be able to marvel and wonder at the land legacy we hold in trust today.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you and Members of the Committee may have.