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Feds unveil proposal to manage roadless lands in Colorado

Groups: rule doesn't go far enough to protect 640,000 acres in White River National Forest

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The U.S. Department of Agriculture unveiled a proposal Thursday to manage 4.2 million areas of roadless lands in national forests in Colorado, including 640,000 in the White River National Forest.

The proposal assigns the highest possible protection to about 560,000 acres in the state. Some of the roadless areas surrounding the Roaring Fork Valley would get that highest protection, including part of Red Table Mountain, Assigination Ridge, a section of land east of Aspen and an upper portion of Hunter Creek, according to Peter Hart, an attorney with Carbondale-based Wilderness Workshop. But a greater number of roadless areas in the area wouldn't receive that highest protection, including Hay Park and the Thompson Divide area, which is feeling pressure from natural gas development, he said.

"There are a number of roadless areas in the Roaring Fork which we feel deserve equal protection," Hart said.

The difference between the areas that get the highest tier of protection and other areas is the exemptions allowed. The federal proposal includes a laundry list of exemptions that could be sought for road building for purposes like logging and oil and gas extraction.

The proposed rule would allow thinning of forests close to communities that were hard-hit by the bark beetle epidemic in recent years. Hart said this latest proposal "reins in" how far into the backcountry the thinning can occur.

White River National Forest Supervisor Scott Fitzwilliams said if the proposal is finalized, it would codify management practices already in place. "It's not a big variation from how we're currently managing," he said.

The big advantage would be establishing some permanence to the regulations. Work has been under way on Colorado's roadless policy for six years.

"We've been in the limbo of unknown for a while now," Fitzwilliams said.

President Clinton enacted a national roadless policy in 2001 that prohibited mining, logging and other activities on 58 million acres of roadless lands. President George W. Bush altered the policy, touching off legal battles that are pending. The Bush administration gave states the right to petition to craft their own roadless policies. Colorado and Idaho are the only states that petitioned.

Wilderness Workshop and eight other conservation groups released a statement Thursday that said Colorado should receive the same level of protection granted by the 2001 National Roadless Rule. "Colorado's roadless areas don't deserve anything less," Hart said.

However, the 2001 National Roadless Rule's legality is still being weighed by a federal court. The coalition sees the Colorado roadless proposal unveiled Thursday as inferior to the national rule, but better than what Colorado had proposed for its own roadless management policy, Hart said.

"The current proposal still falls short of the Obama administration's roadless commitment," the conservation coalition said.

One of the biggest concerns is that it doesn't protect roadless areas from oil and gas development, Hart said, and it doesn't clarify a confusing situation in the Thompson Divide, which includes land southwest of Carbondale.

After the 2001 National Roadless Rule was gutted, gas leases were awarded on public lands in the Thompson Divide area. The conservation groups say those leases were "illegally let," Hart said. They hope that is established as part of the on-going litigation over the 2001 National Roadless Rule.

Meanwhile, the Colorado roadless proposal is open for public review and comment over the next 90 days. The proposed rule and revised draft environmental impact statement are available online at www.fs.usda.gov/goto/coroadlessrule.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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