

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**Forest Service****36 CFR Part 212**

RIN AB-67-0095

Administration of the Forest Development Transportation System

AGENCY: Forest Service, USDA.

ACTION: Advance notice of proposed rulemaking.

SUMMARY: The Forest Service proposes to revise the regulations concerning the management of the National Forest System transportation system to address changes in how the road system is developed, used, maintained, and funded. The existing road system on National Forest System lands was largely funded and constructed to develop areas for timber harvesting and the development of other resources. In the last two decades, interest in the appropriate uses of the resources of the national forests, as well as the costs associated with resource development, including road-building, has generated much public debate. At the same time, resource uses on the national forests have shifted substantially toward recreation. The agency believes this is an appropriate time to consider changes in public opinion, public demand, and public use of national forest resources in the context of the accumulated body of scientific information about the benefits and environmental impacts of roads, and to consider adjustments in the management of the forest road system to respond to these changes and, thus, better serve present and future management objectives in a more efficient manner. Public comments on the scope and nature of a proposed revision of the Forest Services road management policy are invited. The agency will consider all comments in developing the proposed rule.

DATES: Comments must be received in writing by March 30, 1998.

ADDRESSES: Send written comments to: Gerald (Skip) Coghlan, Acting Director, Engineering Staff, Forest Service, USDA, P.O. Box 96090, Washington, D.C. 20090-6090, and also at roads/wo@fs.fed.us on the Internet.

All comments, including names and addresses when provided, are available for public inspection and copying. Persons wishing to inspect the comments are encouraged to call ahead (202-205-1400) to facilitate entrance into the building.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Gerald (Skip) Coghlan, Acting Director, Engineering Staff, 202-205-1400.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:**Background**

The road system on National Forest System lands is extensive and diverse. It includes an estimated 373,000 miles of inventoried forest system roads. These roads are essential for the active management of the resources of the National Forests. They carry an estimated 9,000 Forest Service administrative vehicles daily throughout the forests to duties as varied as wildlife habitat improvement projects, maintenance of recreation facilities, fire suppression, law enforcement, and search and rescue activities. National Forest System roads also carry an estimated 15,000 vehicles daily that are associated with timber harvesting and the development of other resources.

Roads are also essential for public use and enjoyment of the National Forests and Grasslands. The agency estimates that 1.7 million vehicles involved in recreation travel forest roads every day, an increase of over 10 times since 1950.

In addition to the 373,000 miles of inventoried system roads, there are 60,000 miles of roads which exist on National Forest System lands, created by repeated public use, that are not managed or maintained by the agency or considered part of the forest road system.

Public use and demands on national forest resources have shifted considerably during the past 10 years. There has been a decrease in timber harvesting and other commodity uses and steadily-increasing growth in the amount and type of recreation uses. The shift in public use and associated changes in user expectations and access needs requires new approaches to deciding the appropriate size and configuration of the road system. In addition, current funding mechanisms and levels are not adequate to maintain roads to the standards originally planned, to assure minimum ecological impacts, as well as to ensure efficient and safe use. Thus, the agency needs to explore new sources of dependable funding as well as ways to better manage roads with limited resources.

The accumulation of new scientific information is increasing the understanding of the ecological and social impacts of existing roads, new construction of roads in roaded and roadless areas, and the impacts of the management activities associated with maintaining and reconstructing roads. New developments in road-building technology have fewer negative ecological impacts; however, ecological impacts from existing roads are more

extensive than previously thought. For example, under some conditions, existing roads may cause increased frequency of flooding and landslides, increased stream sedimentation, and associated reductions in fish habitat productivity. There may also be concerns associated with the fragmentation and degradation of habitat for some wildlife species caused by roading, as well as reductions in travel corridors of species with large home ranges. Research also indicates that under some circumstances, roading may begin or accelerate the invasion of exotic plant species that ultimately displace native species.

In addition to the impacts of road-building and roads themselves, there are impacts associated with the increased levels of human activities in previously-inaccessible areas provided by new roads. For example, increases in visitor-use have associated resource impacts, including ground and habitat disturbance, increased pressure on wildlife species from hunters and fishers, and increased expectations for amenities. Also, increases in human access may be associated with increases in the frequency of person-caused fires. A more detailed listing of facts related to the nature and scope of the National Forest Road System, public demand, funding, and environmental impacts of roads are published as Appendix A at the end of this notice.

Rulemaking Objectives

The shifts in resource demands and public use coupled with the need to ensure that decisions associated with the location, design, construction, reconstruction, upgrading, decommissioning, and maintenance of roads are informed by current scientific information lead the Forest Service to conclude that it must thoroughly review its road management policy and develop a comprehensive science-based policy for the future. This policy should allow the Forest Service to balance scientific information, public needs and funding levels when determining the size, purpose, and extent of the future forest road transportation system and any specific road building activities. The following are among the expected outcomes and key features of such a long-range policy:

1. Roads will be removed where they are no longer needed, and ecological values will be rehabilitated and restored in formerly-roaded areas. These outcomes will be accomplished by aggressively decommissioning unneeded roads to reduce adverse environmental impacts.

2. Roads most heavily used by the public will be safe and will promote efficient travel. These outcomes will be accomplished by aggressively updating roads (reconstruction, design and maintenance) and reducing environmental impacts in these areas.

3. New roads that are determined necessary for National Forest System management will be designed more carefully to minimize ecological damage, and limited funds will be spent appropriately. These outcomes will be achieved by carefully analyzing factors surrounding the decision to build new roads in roaded areas, as well as the decision to build new roads in roadless areas, to assure that managers make more informed decisions and that only necessary construction is taking place.

The agency invites comments and suggestions on procedures for improving management of the national forest road system.

Agency Actions

Several research efforts are underway to examine the National Forest road system and its uses; to synthesize scientific information on Forest Service roads; and to analyze attitudes toward roads as expressed in the news media. Drafts of these reports are available from Director, Pacific Northwest Research Station, P.O. Box 3890, Portland, OR 97208-3890, 503-808-2100 and also at pnw/r6pnw@fs.fed.us on the Internet.

An essential element of this comprehensive overhaul of forest road policy is to develop improved analytical tools for land managers and resource specialists. To that end, agency researchers and specialists are developing an improved analysis process that assures that the ecological, social, and economic impacts of proposed construction and reconstruction of National Forest System roads are objectively evaluated, and that there is a full consideration of public demand on National Forest System roads in the context of current scientific information. This process will undergo an independent technical and scientific peer review before adoption.

Until the effects of roads can be more rigorously assessed, the Forest Service is also proposing to issue an interim rule to temporarily suspend road construction and reconstruction in roadless areas for not more than 18 months. The proposed interim rule appears in the same separate part of today's **Federal Register** with a request for public comment and notice of the initiation of scoping under the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969.

Suggestions on the scope and nature of a proposed revision of the Forest

Service's road management policy, as well as comments on the agency's preliminary suggestions are invited. The agency will consider all comments in developing the proposed rule.

Dated: January 22, 1998.

Mike Dombeck,
Chief, Forest Service.

Appendix A—Facts About the National Forest Road System

1. The National Forest Road System is extensive and diverse; it includes an estimated 373,000 miles of forest roads.

a. One-fourth (23%) are called arterial or collector roads and they serve all users, including passenger cars.

b. Over one-half (57%) are roads that are only passable by high-clearance vehicles such as four-wheel drives.

c. One-fifth (20%) are closed by gates.

d. The Forest Service has identified an additional estimated 60,000 miles of "uninventoried roads" that were created by repeated use but never build or maintained to any standards. The actual number of miles of "uninventoried roads" is likely far greater than this estimate. There are also additional public roads on National Forest System lands, such as state and county roads that are typically maintained by others.

e. There are more than 7,000 bridges on forest roads, three-fourths of these are on the arterial and collector roads.

f. In 1996, new construction of National Forest System roads was 434 miles, or 0.1% of the total National Forest road system.

2. Roads are essential for public use and enjoyment of National Forests and Grasslands.

a. An estimated 15,000 logging trucks and vehicles associated with timber harvesting use National Forest roads each day, about the same number as in 1950.

b. An estimated 1.7 million vehicles associated with recreation activities travel forest roads each day, over 10 times more than in 1950. Recreation usage is projected to continue to increase.

c. An estimated 9,000 Forest Service administrative vehicles travel forest roads each day, conducting duties essential to the stewardship of forest resources, including special use administration, wildlife habitat improvement projects, maintenance and operation of recreation facilities, law enforcement, and fire suppression.

3. Public use and demands on National Forest System lands have shifted considerably during the past 10 years. The size and composition of the National Forest System road system has not been adjusted accordingly.

a. Recreation usage has increased from less than 250 million Recreation Visitor Days to almost 350 million and is projected to continue to increase.

b. Timber harvest has dropped to below 4 billion board feet from a high of about 12 billion board feet annually.

c. The need for, and understanding of, ecological benefits that these forest and rangelands provide has increased, such as clean water, wildlife habitat, and habitat for endangered species.

4. While a significant portion of the 191,000,000 acres of the National Forest System is roaded, a significant portion remains roadless.

a. An estimated 34,000,000 acres are currently designated as wilderness; an estimated 6,000,000 acres are designated as proposed wilderness in forest plans.

b. An estimated 33,000,000 acres are currently unroaded in blocks of 5,000 acres or more for which the existing forest plans have proposed management that could include building new roads.

c. Of the 33,000,000 acres that are unroaded and available for management activities that could include roading, an estimated 8,000,000 acres are classified as "suitable for timber production."

5. Current funding levels are inadequate to maintain the roads to planned standards that permit efficient and safe use and keep ecological impacts at acceptably low levels.

a. About 40% of National Forest System roads are fully maintained to the planned safety and environmental standards for which they were designed.

b. The backlog of reconstruction needs on National Forest System roads is considerable. For example, the backlog on arterial and collector roads alone is estimated to be over \$10 million, due to their age (three-fourths are over 50 years old) and their lack of adequate regular maintenance.

c. From 1991 to 1996, funding for decommissioning roads has only financed a reduction of about 0.5% of National Forest System roads per year.

6. New scientific information continues to increase our understanding of the ecological and social impacts from existing roads and associated management activities. In some instances, ecological impacts from existing roads are more extensive than previously thought. Examples of these impacts include: increased frequency of flooding and landslides; increased stream sedimentation and associated reduction in fish habitat productivity; increased habitat fragmentation and degradation which reduce the travel corridors needed by species requiring large home ranges; increased frequency of person-caused fires as a result of access; and invasion of exotic species that displace native species. In contrast, recently constructed roads that are better designed and better located than earlier roads, and result in fewer and less severe ecological impacts.

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Administration of the Forest Development Transportation System: Temporary Suspension of Road Construction in Roadless Areas

AGENCY: Forest Service, USDA.