

**Colorado Wild ♦ Environment Colorado ♦ Colorado Environmental Coalition  
Western Colorado Congress ♦ Colorado Mountain Club ♦ High Country Citizens Alliance  
San Juan Citizens Alliance ♦ Wilderness Workshop  
The Wilderness Society ♦ Natural Resources Defense Council**

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April 22, 2009

The Honorable Tom Vilsack  
Secretary of Agriculture  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

The undersigned groups look forward with enthusiasm to your leadership of the Department of Agriculture and to a renewed dedication of its agencies and personnel to the well-being of America's natural resources which their actions affect. We are writing today to ask you to direct the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) to suspend action on the current rulemaking underway for management of inventoried roadless areas (IRAs) in Colorado until new agency leadership is in place, and a full and fair discussion can be had with that leadership about how we can best protect Colorado's roadless national forests. Additionally, we request that you direct the USFS to refrain from proposing or implementing any projects requiring road construction or logging in any roadless area, including those in Colorado, without prior approval from your office.

We believe there is a critical need for administrative action within the Administration's first 100 days to ensure that Colorado's national forest roadless areas are not harmed in the short term and that any such rule is also consistent with the long-term conservation strategies and priorities of President Barack Obama, who has supported the Roadless Area Conservation Rule as the best way to protect the nation's nearly 60 million acres of roadless forests that the USFS has inventoried.

The final draft of the proposed rule, which was initiated under the Bush administration, is close to being completed by the USFS Rocky Mountain Region (Region 2). Colorado groups have worked with the State of Colorado and the USFS regarding the draft Colorado rule, and we appreciate the open dialogue we have had regarding ways it could be strengthened. In some ways the proposed rule has been improved since release of the draft rule last July. We appreciate the efforts made by the state and the Forest Service to address these concerns.

We continue to have strong concerns with the proposed rule as it now stands. It would allow broad exceptions for road building and logging associated with new coal mining and fuel reduction projects far removed from communities where they will be ineffective in protecting communities from fire.

Of particular concern are the oil and gas "gap" leases – those issued after the 2001 Rule became effective but before adoption of a Colorado rule. These leases undermine numerous roadless areas of high value. We appreciate the State of Colorado's work to address these concerns, but we believe the Colorado Rule would more effectively address this issue by prohibiting construction of new roads for any leases issued post-2001.

Application of the provisions in the proposed rule could jeopardize valuable wildlife habitat, clean water sources, and popular recreation areas. Without sufficient improvements to the Colorado Rule, a strong national rule would be necessary to protect Colorado's roadless forests.

We believe our request for prompt action is not only necessary but also is consistent with the support that President Obama and you, as governor, have expressed for the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule. The request to ensure that actions inconsistent with strong roadless area protections not proceed in roadless areas without approval from your office is also consistent with the recent requests you received from nearly 150 members of Congress, including Colorado's two U.S. Senators and Representatives Diana DeGette and Jared Polis, who have called for a "time out" on activities in IRAs until permanent national administrative protection can be implemented.

We will gladly provide additional information to you or your staff upon request. We look forward to working with you and President Obama to ensure that the remaining roadless areas in our National Forests will not be threatened until meaningful and permanent protections can be implemented. We appreciate your quick attention to this issue of utmost importance to the people of Colorado and across the country to whom these forests belong.

Sincerely,

Rocky Smith, Forest Watch Program Director  
Colorado Wild

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Cc: John Norris, Chief of Staff, Secretary Vilsack  
David Lazarus, Senior Advisor to the Secretary, USDA  
Meryl L. R. Harrell, Special Assistant to the Under Secretary, Natural Resources & Environment  
Nancy Sutley, Chair, White House Council on Environmental Quality

Colorado Governor Bill Ritter  
Rick Cables, Rocky Mountain Regional Forester  
Members of Colorado's congressional delegation