

WILD AT HEART

Saving the Last of America's Roadless Backcountry



A Center for Biological Diversity Report



Roadless areas contain watersheds affording abundant clean water. Rapid River, Nez Perce NF, Idaho.

INTRODUCTION

Spanning 58.5 million acres in 38 states, America's national forest roadless areas contain some of our nation's last pristine forests. From the expansive wilds of the American Southwest and Northern Rockies to the colorful deciduous woods of New England and the Appalachians, these last remnants of unspoiled backcountry provide habitat for wildlife, headwaters to rivers, and unparalleled recreational opportunities for millions of Americans.

In 2001, the U.S. Forest Service issued the Roadless Area Conservation Rule, which protects all of the country's roadless areas in National Forests from most logging and new roads being built for logging, mining, coal, gas, and other new mineral or energy purposes. The rule was created after 600 local hearings in communities near National Forests and 1.5 million public comments were submitted.

The Roadless Area Conservation Rule does not close any existing roads or trails for recreation activities, does not restrict access for private property owners; it does not interfere with existing leases or permits for ski areas, mineral development, or oil and gas operations; and it allows for new roads to be built to fight fires and to respond to other natural disasters.

Since entering office, the Bush Administration has repeatedly attempted to weaken and undermine the roadless rule, and finally repealed it in 2005.

In 2007, a federal judge struck down the Administration's repeal. Now, Administration officials are attempting to open the door to corporate special interests on a state-by-state basis.

The first assault was on Alaska's Tongass Rainforest. The Tongass National Forest contains some of the most ecologically important — and the most economically valuable — roadless areas in the National Forest System. When the timber industry

sued to reopen these forests for access to log its old growth trees, the Bush Administration settled the lawsuit out of court — handing the keys to the forest over to the timber industry.

Now, Administration officials have begun a new rulemaking process to weaken protections for the National Forest Roadless areas of Idaho. With more than 9.3 million acres of rugged, beautiful backcountry and a heritage uniquely grounded in hunting, fishing, and other recreation, Idaho exemplifies the need to maintain nationwide protections for roadless areas.

Amidst growing development pressures, the widening impact of global warming, and ongoing efforts to undo existing protections for pristine forests, the protection of intact national forest roadless areas remains one of the most critical conservation priorities in America. But despite overwhelming scientific and public support, the current administration has announced plans to loosen existing protections and open these irreplaceable wildlands to mining, logging, and other development.

Idaho's unspoiled backcountry, like all of America's remaining pristine forests, is special—not only to Idahoans, but to all Americans. As undeveloped lands become scarcer, we need to think ahead to guard these quiet, special places where it is still possible to escape the noise and distractions of everyday life. Maintaining these pristine national forests in their natural state rather than turning them over to corporate development is only way to pass these national treasures on to future generations.

Cover photo: Lochsa Valley, Idaho in winter.

A Brief History of Roadless Area Conservation

Roadless areas are currently protected under the landmark Roadless Area Conservation Rule. In 2001, the U.S. Forest Service recognized the importance of unspoiled landscapes to wildlife and people and issued consistent and reasonable regulations for their protection. The result of 600 community meetings and more than one and a half million public comments, this carefully crafted policy accommodates existing rights, recreation, and emergency access, while prohibiting new development that would destroy the special value of these wild places.

This policy set aside nearly sixty million acres of pristine, unspoiled national forest roadless areas. These areas total only

one-third of the entire national forest system, but contain some of the most peaceful, unspoiled landscapes in the country.

After promising to uphold the Rule, the Bush Administration quickly changed course by suspending the rule. When the legality of the protections was upheld in federal court, the Administration repealed the rule and substituted its own, weakened version.

In 2007, a federal court found ruled that the repeal was illegal. The state-by-state rulemakings are the Administration's latest attempt to open the door to logging, mining, and road construction in roadless forests.

NATIONAL FOREST ROADLESS AREAS: OUR NATURAL HERITAGE

America's national forest roadless areas are unique natural treasures, supporting outstanding ecological values and providing unmatched recreation opportunities. They also serve as the economic backbone for many rural communities. For these and other reasons, it is vital that we protect these public lands as part of our natural heritage.

Ecological Values

National forest roadless areas supply clean water, essential wildlife habitat, and some of America's last and largest ancient forests.

Over 2,000 watersheds, supplying clean drinking water for over 60 million Americans, originate in roadless areas that are safeguarded by the Roadless Area Conservation Rule. These same watersheds provide some of America's last best spawning habitat for native trout, steelhead and salmon.

Roadless areas are also critical in maintaining and preserving the web of life, providing essential habitat for more than 1,600 species of wildlife, including many threatened, endangered, or sensitive plant and animal species. These undeveloped landscapes harbor populations of some of America's most emblematic species, including the grizzly bear and bald eagle. Further, scientists have concluded that roadless areas provide important habitat "connectivity" between other large protected areas like national parks. This allows elk, mule deer and other migrating species to travel between otherwise isolated reserves.

It is for these reasons that in 2004, after the Bush Administration first suspended the Roadless Rule, more than 125 scientists wrote to the Administration requesting its reinstatement. According to their letter:

"There is growing consensus among the scientific community that a strong roadless area conservation rule is one of the cornerstones to sustainable public lands management, biodiversity conservation, and ecosystem health of the national forests. Therefore, we request that you reinstate the 2001 Roadless Conservation Rule that received very thoughtful input by scientists and the public."-- Letter to USDA Forest Service, October 18, 2004¹

National forest roadless areas contain some of the healthiest ancient forests anywhere in the United States. These naturally regulated areas are less prone to catastrophic wildfire and are often more resilient to disease and insect infestations than areas that have been logged. Here, groves of pine and fir trees that have survived for centuries stand testaments to the unspoiled beauty of America. These ancient giants will survive for millennia still — if we let them.

Recreational Values

Roadless areas provide unparalleled opportunities for hiking, camping, swimming, canoeing, hunting, cross country skiing, fishing, and a host of other activities, as well as simply providing a quiet escape from the hustle and bustle of modern living.

Roadless areas are home to some of America's premier and historic hiking trails. The Appalachian Trail, Pacific Crest Trail, Lewis & Clark Trail, California Trail, and North Country Trail all traverse national forest roadless areas for hundreds of miles.

Our national forest system continues to draw ever-increasing numbers of visitors each year, but more than one-half of these lands are already open to development. Protecting the last undisturbed backcountry is essential if we are to maintain these opportunities for ourselves and pass them on to our children.

Economic Values

Roadless areas also provide important economic benefits to local communities. Millions of Americans generate welcome revenue for local communities when they visit these undeveloped lands each year to hunt, fish, hike, or simply relax. Nationwide, recreation and outdoor business contribute over \$730 billion each year to the United States economy, providing more than 6.5 million jobs and \$88 billion in state and federal taxes.²

In contrast, road construction and logging in America's national forests are bad for taxpayers. After citizens pay to subsidize logging on public forestlands, they pay again to repair the damage and clean up the mess left behind by the timber companies. Subsidies to timber companies to cut trees in national forests cost taxpayers over \$2 billion from 1992 to 1997. In addition, there is a backlog in repairs and maintenance on the 440,000 miles of roads already in the national forest system — the vast majority of which were built for timber corporations. The estimated cost to taxpayers of this repair and maintenance is near \$10 billion.³

Open Pit Phosphate Mines: Turning Pristine National Forests into Superfund Sites

In weakening protections for Idaho's unspoiled roadless areas, the Bush Administration intends to facilitate increased phosphate mining. These massive open-pit mines would release dangerous amounts of pollution into Idaho's unspoiled waterways.

Among the most dangerous of these chemicals is selenium. Although potentially beneficial in trace amounts, large amounts of



A mother and child together enjoy the serenity of ancient forests. Meadow Creek old-growth, Nez Perce NF, Idaho.

selenium are extremely harmful to people and wildlife. In the Blackfoot River drainage, selenium poisoning threatens some of the most important remaining populations of Yellowstone cutthroat trout. Trout have disappeared entirely from the East Mill Creek tributary, and the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare has warned parents to limit the number of fish their children eat from the creek.¹⁴

Selenium contamination from more than a dozen mines has been found in Southeastern Idaho, presenting a serious toxic threat to wildlife and livestock on public lands. In 2000, federal regulators determined that these problems were significant enough to require the use of federal

Superfund authorities to compel and finance detailed investigations and cleanups at each of the mines. The investigations and cleanup studies are still incomplete.

Currently, more than 10,000 acres of roadless areas have been leased for phosphate mining. Still, the Bush Administration wants to open the door to even more open-pit mines. Its proposal will allow another 8,000 acres of phosphate mining within Idaho's roadless areas. If this proposal moves forward, mining companies will be permitted to turn some of Idaho's most pristine landscapes into Superfund sites that would contaminate waterways for generations.

IDAHO'S ROADLESS AREAS: THE GEM STATE'S UNIQUE TREASURE

Idaho's backcountry is special to Idaho, and the rest of America, just as it is. These areas belong to all of us. We cannot allow the federal government and developers to open the door to spoiling Idaho's special places. In these times of rapid change, we need to think ahead to guard those quiet, special places where we escape the noise and crowds of everyday life. Let's keep existing protections in place to keep Idaho's backcountry areas as they are.

Ecological Values

Spanning 9.3 million unspoiled acres, Idaho's roadless backcountry makes up the heart of the last great wild frontier in the lower 48 states. These pristine forests are some of the last places in America where a full array of native plants, fish and can still be found. Species as diverse as the grizzly bear, wolf, wolverine, beaver, bull trout, and steelhead thrive in the abundant habitat that Idaho's rugged backcountry affords.

Having averted most logging, road building, and other forms of development, Idaho's roadless forests are often more resistant to catastrophic fires, insect outbreaks, and the impacts of global warming. Idaho's roadless forests are also less prone to invasion by exotic species and are not threatened by soil erosion caused by road building and logging. These pristine lands form the headwaters for countless cold-water streams and rivers, providing clean drinking water for people, and critical spawning habitat for bull trout, steelhead, and other native fish.

Recreational Values

Idaho's roadless backcountry cradles the Gem State's world-famous legacy of outdoor recreation. These pristine lands are where Idahoans and other Americans go to hunt, fish, hike, camp, and escape the noise and crowds of burgeoning population centers. Nearly 90 percent of Idaho's hunters rely on roadless forests for quality hunting, and more than 90 percent of the biggest bull elk and 70 percent of the biggest mule deer are hunted from Idaho's roadless areas.

Among the scores of sportsmen who hunt Idaho, many travel from out of state to enjoy the state's abundant unspoiled backcountry. Idaho hosts more than 416,000 anglers each year for

legendary trout and steelhead fishing. Of Idaho's 53 remaining populations of endangered Bull Trout, 50 are found in roadless areas, and two in Wilderness areas.⁴ In contrast, streams in some roaded portions of the Boise National Forest have 1,741 road crossings, making 90 percent of these waterways impassable to fish.⁵

Idaho's roadless backcountry is also a famous destination for recreation enthusiasts. With abundant snow and expansive mountains, backcountry skiing is amongst the best in the lower 48. And when the snow melts, exploring the rugged beauty of unspoiled forests becomes a favorite of whitewater boaters, backpackers, and nature lovers.

Economic Values

The Idaho Department of Fish and Game receives half of its \$76 million annual operating budget from hunters and anglers—most of it from out-of-state visitors. Hunters and anglers spend over a \$500 million annually in Idaho.⁶ Overall, outdoor recreation produces more than \$2.2 billion in retail sales annually, providing 37,000 jobs and generating over \$150 million in annual sales tax revenue.⁷

Taxpayers are also footing a huge bill to subsidize logging in national forests within Idaho. To date, these forests have a \$646 million road maintenance backlog.⁸ This is the equivalent of \$440 for every man, woman, and child in Idaho just to maintain existing logging roads in the national forests. Preserving Idaho's remaining roadless areas will support rural economies and save taxpayers' money.

What's At Stake? The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem

Located in eastern Idaho, western Wyoming, and northern Utah, the Caribou-Targhee National Forest abuts Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks in the "Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem"—the largest block of relatively undisturbed plant and animal habitat in the contiguous United States. With its diversity of fish and wildlife and natural landscapes, the region is widely recognized for its ecological value. In fact, it is so special that the United Nations has designated it as a Biosphere Reserve. In total, the Caribou-Targhee National Forest contains

50 separate roadless areas extending over 1,478,000 acres of Idaho backcountry.

The Bush Administration is proposing to open 251,800 acres of roadless areas in the Caribou-Targhee National Forest to new oil, gas development and associated road construction. The proposal would also allow 12,100 acres of new phosphate mines and associated road construction, resulting in up to 545 million tons of phosphate being dug from and transported through previously pristine forests.¹³ The ecological consequence of this development, from selenium pollution and siltation, would far exceed the geographic footprint of the mining itself.



**Roadless watersheds provide spawning habitat for native fish. Kelly Creek, Clearwater NF, Idaho
Inset, Smoky Mountain Phosphate Mine Proposed for Expansion into Sage Creek and Meade Peak Roadless Areas.**

.....
According to the Forest Service, “[The Caribou-Targhee National Forest] lies almost entirely within “the Greater Yellowstone Area” an area of over 12 million acres and the largest remaining block of relatively undisturbed plant and animal habitat in the contiguous United States. The area continues to gain prominence for its ecological integrity. The United Nations has identified the area as a Biosphere Reserve.” – U.S. Forest Service¹²
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PRESERVING OUR NATURAL HERITAGE

Protecting pristine forests for future generations requires keeping their existing protections set forth in the Roadless Area Conservation Rule. But the Bush Administration is trying to chip away at these protections. It plans to open Idaho’s pristine backcountry to development rather than preserving these natural landscapes. This underscores the need for reliable, nationally consistent protections for all of America’s remaining roadless areas.

Petitions and Precedent: Loosening Protections in Idaho?

Compared to existing protections, the Bush Administration’s proposed rule for Idaho’s national forest roadless areas would dramatically increase logging, road construction, mining, and other forms of development. In addition to compromising the quality of the state’s rugged, pristine backcountry, the proposed rule for Idaho, if adopted, would also set a precedent for rescinding protections for roadless areas in other states.

According to the U.S. Forest Service, under the proposed rule for Idaho, only one-third (3.2 million acres) of Idaho’s currently protected 9.3 million roadless acres will be managed in a manner that retains “natural processes and roadless characteristics.”⁹ The remaining 6 million acres — equivalent to an area roughly the size of Massachusetts— would lose current protections.

Similar figures apply to the protection of scenic values. The 2001 rule protects about 9.3 million acres of roadless national forest land in a state of “high to very high scenic integrity”. According to the Forest Service, the new state-specific rule would retain this degree of protection on only 3.5 million acres.¹⁰

Compared to current policies, specific changes in backcountry under the Bush Administration’s proposed rule for Idaho include:

- Eight times more annual logging
- A four-fold increase in annual road construction and reconstruction
- A 170,000-acres increase in lands available for geothermal development

- An increase of 545 million tons of phosphate mining; and
- Other mining activities on an additional 609,500 acres.

The U.S. Forest Service predicts that the Bush Administration’s proposed rule for Idaho’s pristine backcountry would:

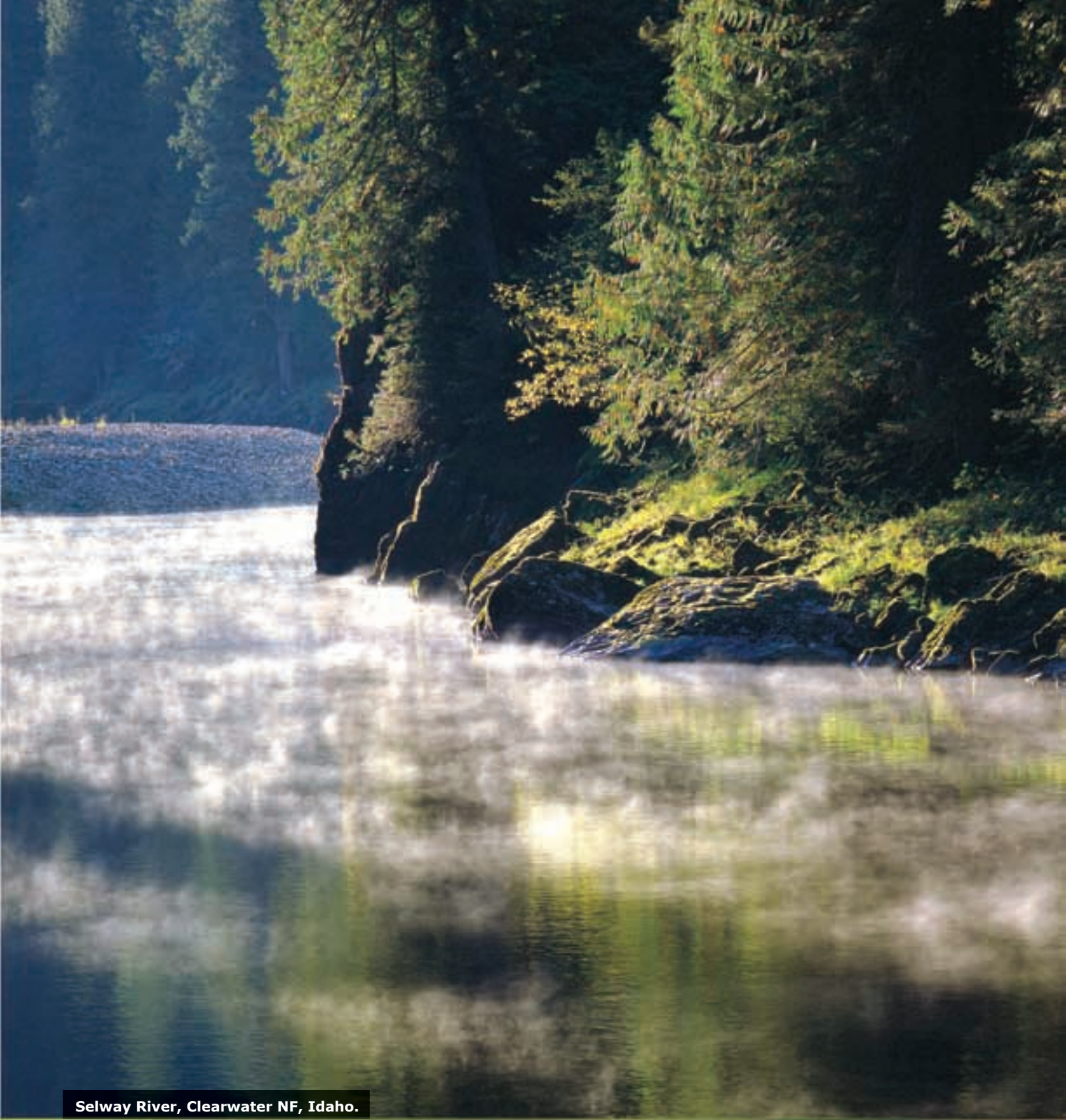
- Diminish natural processes, roadless characteristics, and scenic integrity across 6 million acres (an area the size of Massachusetts);
- Reduce the scenic integrity of the same 6 million acres;
- Adversely impact hunting and fishing opportunities;
- Negatively affect numerous species and habitats, including 611 sensitive plant populations;
- Increase the spread of noxious weeds across 608,500 acres;
- Compromise the wilderness character of currently pristine forests.

Protections for All Roadless Areas

The potential for new development in Idaho’s pristine backcountry underscores the need for careful, nationally consistent protections for all of America’s last roadless areas. Those protections are already in place, established under the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule. Maintaining pristine forests as they are for future generations requires keeping existing policies in place.

Opening the Door to Development in Idaho’s Pristine Forest Roadless Areas¹¹

Activity	Change Under Bush Administration Proposal
Logging	Increased by 800%
New or rebuilt roads	Increased by 400%
Phosphate mining	Increased by 545 million tons
Forestlands retaining their unspoiled character	Reduced by six million acres



Selway River, Clearwater NF, Idaho.

CONCLUSION

National forest roadless areas in Idaho are the cornerstone of the state's cherished heritage of hunting, fishing, and outdoor recreation. They contain the headwaters of our cleanest rivers, spawning Yellowstone cutthroat trout and other native trout and salmon populations. They provide habitat for mule deer and elk, as well as endangered, threatened and rare species like grizzly bear, lynx, and wolverines. And they provide unmatched opportunities for remote adventure and solitude.

Protecting our last remaining roadless areas is one of the most important environmental issues facing America's public lands today. If the Bush Administration is successful in removing current protections for Idaho's roadless areas, it will set a precedent that may open roadless areas in other states to logging, mining, road construction and other development.

America's conservation organizations are united in their commitment to defend our last wild forests — in Alaska, Idaho, Colorado, and throughout the nation. We are equally united in our opposition to the Bush Administration's attempt to promote mining, logging, and oil-and-gas development in these areas.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Please join us in fighting to protect America's last intact wild forests. To find out how you can help preserve these natural treasures, please visit:

Center for Biological Diversity's roadless area conservation campaign:

<http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/swcbd/programs/public-lands/roadless/>.

Heritage Forest Campaign's roadless area conservation website:

<http://www.ourforests.org/>



Idaho old growth.

Clearcutting Our Heritage — At Taxpayer Expense

One area that is threatened by the Bush Administration's proposed rule is the Cove-Mallard Roadless Area in the Salmon River watershed. Part of the largest intact forest ecosystem in the lower 48 states, Cove-Mallard provides essential habitat for an array of wildlife including Chinook salmon, bald eagle, and grizzly bear. The area was slated for massive logging in the 1990s, as timber companies lined up to remove 16,000 truckloads of timber.

The logging was finally halted by public protest, legal challenges and, finally, the protections of the Roadless Area Conservation Rule—but only after more than 10,000 acres of the region had been logged, at a cost to taxpayers of more than \$6 million. Today 70,000 acres of Cove-Mallard remains pristine and unspoiled, but these could be lost if the Bush Administration opens the door to logging and development.



CITATIONS

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¹² USDA Forest Service, *Caribou-Targhee National Forest website, About Us*. Accessed at: <http://www.fs.fed.us/r4/caribou-targhee/about/> (7 January 2008).

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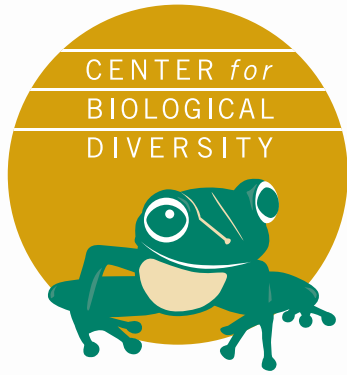
Selway Falls, Nez Perce NF, Idaho.

PHOTO CREDITS

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Smoky Mountain Phosphate Mine courtesy, Marv Hoyt, Greater Yellowstone Coalition





Because life is good.

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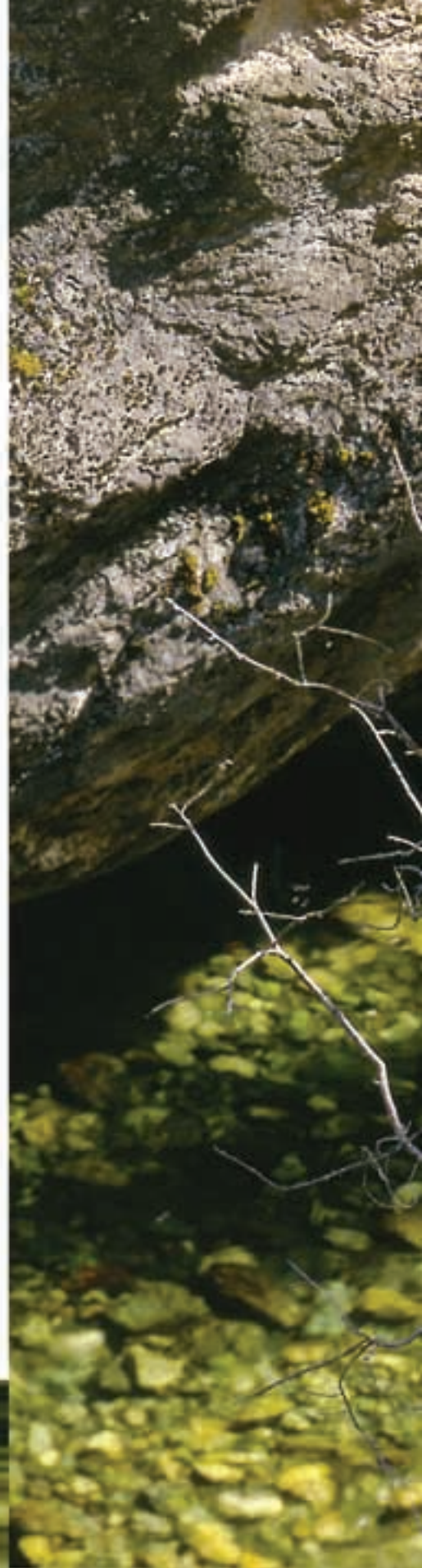
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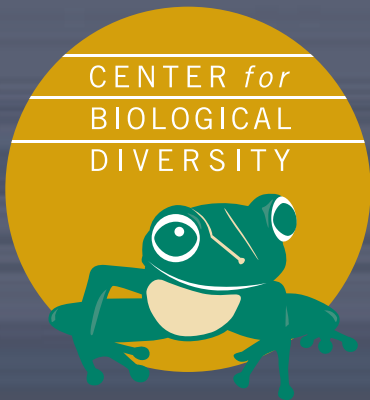
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Roadless areas yield clean, clear mountain streams for the benefit of people and wildlife alike. Nez Perce NF, Idaho.



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