

CURRENT STATUS OF ROADS ON NATIONAL FOREST SYSTEM LANDS

*Primary Research and Analysis by Cindy Deacon Williams
January 1999*

Based on the current status of roads on National Forest System lands, there are several issues that must be addressed in any new roads policy:

- the backlog of road maintenance (i.e., 60% of existing roads are not maintained to the safety and environmental standards for which they were designed);
- the backlog of road decommissioning (i.e., funding to retire ecologically harmful roads);
- the burgeoning network of “uninventoried” roads (i.e., over 60,000 miles of road have been created by repeated usage, but were not built and are not maintained to any standard);
- the failure of the size and composition of the National Forest Roads System to reflect the shift in public use and demand (i.e., recreation usage has increased over 40% during the last 10 years and still is rising while timber harvest has declined by 2/3, yet new road decisions are planned to meet timber harvest needs not recreation needs); and
- the lack of policy guidance regarding management of 33 million acres of currently roadless areas, including 8 million roadless acres designated as suitable for timber production, that are neither designated Wilderness nor proposed for wilderness designation nor provided any special classification that highlights their rarity and ecological importance.
- **Most importantly the policy must remedy the lack of biological/ecological prioritization of all road work – deconstruction, decommissioning maintenance, reconstruction.**

The National Forest Road System — estimated at 373,000 miles of forest roads — is extensive and diverse. Twenty-three percent of the roads are arterial or collector roads that serve all users, including passenger cars. Fifty-seven percent are roads that only are passable by high-clearance vehicles such as four-wheel drives. Twenty percent are closed by gates, but their environmental impacts are not otherwise mitigated. In addition to these known roads, the Forest Service has identified an estimated 60,000 miles of "uninventoried roads" that were created by repeated use but never built or maintained to any standards. The actual number of miles of "uninventoried roads" likely is far greater than this estimate. There also are additional public roads on National Forest System lands, such as state and county roads that typically are maintained by others. There are more than 7,000 bridges on forest roads (three-fourths of these on arterial and collector roads), and untold numbers of other stream crossings (e.g., culverts, fords, etc.).

Current funding levels are inadequate to maintain existing roads to planned standards minimally needed to keep ecological impacts at low levels. About 60% of National Forest System roads are not fully maintained to the planned safety and environmental standards for which they were designed. The backlog of reconstruction needs on National Forest System roads is considerable. For example, the backlog on arterial and collector roads is estimated to be over \$10 billion, due to their age (three-fourths are over 50 years old) and their lack of adequate regular maintenance. Furthermore, funding from 1991 to 1996 for decommissioning roads has only financed a reduction of about 0.5% of National Forest System roads per year despite the fact that many more roads meet no existing or anticipated future need and their continued presence poses grave ecological risk.

About 60% of National Forest System roads are not fully maintained to the planned safety and environmental standards for which they were designed.

Public use and demands on National Forest System lands have shifted considerably during the past 10 years, but the size and composition of the National Forest System road system has not been adjusted accordingly. Annual recreation usage has increased from less than 250 million Recreation Visitor Days to almost 350 million and is projected to continue to increase. On the other hand, timber harvest has dropped to below 4 billion board feet from a high of about 12 billion board feet annually. Nonetheless, road construction largely still is an artifact of timber harvest with roads approved, placed, designed, and constructed primarily to meet logging needs.

While a significant portion of the 191 million acres of the National Forest System is roaded, approximately 38% (or 73 million acres) remains roadless. Of this, an estimated 34 million acres currently are designated as wilderness and an estimated 6 million acres are designated as proposed wilderness in forest plans. An estimated 33 million acres currently are unroaded in blocks of 5,000 acres or more for which the existing forest plans have proposed management that could include building new roads. Of the 33 million acres that are unroaded and available for management activities that could include roading, an estimated 8 million acres are classified as "suitable for timber production," and therefore likely to have road decisions guided predominantly by timber harvest priorities.