

Forest Service Moves to Rescind the Roadless Rule in Its Entirety

Trump administration rescission would open 44 million acres of public lands and waters to road building and industrial logging

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Today, August 18, 2026, Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins announced that the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) has filed a proposed rule to rescind the national 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule completely.

She called the widely popular Roadless Rule—as it’s commonly known—“a one-size-fits-all restriction that has frustrated land managers and served as a barrier to wildfire risk reduction work across large swaths of America’s national forests.”

This is incorrect and deeply misleading, and I’ll explain why below.

But first, some historical background.

By the end of the 20th century, the U.S. Forest Service had built one of the largest road networks on Earth.

More than 380,000 miles of official roads cross America’s national forests—enough to circle the planet about 15 times. (For reference: the entire U.S. Interstate Highway System is less than 50,000 miles.)

Built largely to support logging, mining, and other development, the system opened up enormous areas of public forests, while leaving the government with sprawling and expensive infrastructure that it couldn’t afford any longer—mainly due to consistent budget cuts.

By 2000, the Forest Service faced an estimated \$8.4 billion deferred maintenance backlog, [according to Taxpayers for Common Sense](#).

The Clinton administration decided that if there wasn’t enough money to maintain them, it was probably a good idea to stop building roads on federal forest lands.

So they made the fiscally responsible—fiscally conservative—decision to stop doing that.

After years of environmental review, hundreds of public meetings, and about 1.6 million public comments, the Forest Service adopted the Roadless Area Conservation Rule in January 2001. Roughly 90 percent of the comments—an overwhelming majority—supported the rule, which generally prohibited new road construction, reconstruction, and commercial logging across 58.5 million acres of Inventoried Roadless Areas.

Most of those areas, however, remain open to hunting, fishing, hiking, camping, rock climbing, horseback riding, and other traditional activities to this day. Many allow limited motorized access.

The only thing the Roadless Rule does is prevent the federal government from spending taxpayer money on adding more roads to a system it can’t afford in the first place.

Crucially, the Roadless Rule doesn’t ban the construction of temporary roads and fuel treatment projects when and where they’re needed. It allows management activities that reduce the threat of severe wildfire, restore ecosystems, protect endangered species, and address public-safety concerns.

For 25 years, the Roadless Rule has served—durably, successfully, and popularly—as a national conservation backstop, protecting some of the country’s cleanest watersheds, most intact wildlife habitat, and finest remaining backcountry.

However, last year, on June 23, 2025, in response to President Trump’s [Executive Order 14192, Unleashing Prosperity Through Deregulation](#), Agriculture Secretary Rollins [announced her intention](#) to rescind the Roadless Rule.

Due to a number of lawsuits, particularly in Alaska, it took well over a year for the U.S. Forest Service to actually file a new rule to formally rescind it.

That’s what happened this morning, Tuesday, August 18, 2026.

In [a press statement](#), Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins announced that the **“U.S. Forest Service has filed a proposed rule to rescind in its entirety the national 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule.”**

“Our forests can’t afford another decade of inaction. Across the country, we’ve watched preventable conditions – overgrown stands, insect outbreaks and disease – turn healthy landscapes into tinderboxes,” she said.

“For too long, outdated restrictions have kept tens of millions of forested acres off-limits to the very treatments that improve forest health and reduce wildfire risk to our communities. Today, we filed a proposal to restore authority to local forest managers who know the land best, removing the barriers that have kept them from doing the work the land demands. It’s time to turn the page on the failed roadless rule and return our forests to health and productivity.”

If finalized, the action would eliminate the quarter-century-old national restrictions on the (re)construction of roads and commercial logging across approximately 44.7 million acres of national forest land.

Idaho and Colorado, which have their own state-specific rules, would keep their separate Roadless Area protections.

To be clear: today’s announcement does not mean that the Roadless Rule has been erased. This action by the USFS is a proposed rule, not a final decision.

The administration is still legally required to complete an environmental review, receive and analyze public comments, and issue a final rule.

Their main argument is that Roadless Areas make it harder to prevent wildfires. In their mind, that means removing more trees. Numerous scientific studies prove that this reasoning is completely backwards.

In fact, [data from the U.S. Forest Service itself](#) shows that 78 percent of human-caused fires on national forests begin within half a mile of a road.

And it’s not just roads that greatly increase the risk of wildfires in national forests. Removing trees can invite more sunrays deeper into the forest, which can make the landscape hotter and drier. Thinned forests also act less like a windbreaker than a dense forest, which could accelerate the spread of fire.

Additionally and no less importantly, roads fragment habitat and damage streams.

According to a [report by Trout Unlimited](#)—whose current CEO, Chris Wood, actually helped develop the Roadless Rule under the Clinton administration—nearly 70 percent of public land within Roadless Areas supports native trout or salmon habitat.

These public lands protect cold headwaters for cutthroat trout, brook trout, salmon, and steelhead. New roads can add sediment into streams, warm up the water, block fish movement, and leave taxpayers on the hook for failing culverts and eroding slopes for years after the logging has ended.

The wildlife stakes are equally high. Roadless lands provide critical habitat for elk, mule deer, bighorn sheep, lynx, wolverines, black and grizzly bears, and countless other less-high-profile species.

In grizzly country, especially, roads bring more people into remote habitat, which increases displacement, conflict, and bear mortality.

A fascinating [analysis by WildEarth Guardians](#) earlier this year shows that about 4.4 million acres of Roadless Areas in Montana and Wyoming provide crucial connectivity pathways for female grizzly bears.

In fact, [in a 2024 report](#), both the U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recognized how important Roadless Areas are for grizzly bear recovery:

“These lasting land designations ensure that large proportions of recovery zones and additional areas outside the recovery zones remain secure for grizzly bears into the future without the development of new roads, extractive industries, or other human structures.”

Roadless Areas also hold [more than 25,000 miles of trails](#), along with over 760 miles of whitewater routes, thousands of climbing and bouldering routes, world-class backcountry hunting grounds, and pristine fishing waters.

Their economic and recreational value comes mainly from what is *not* there: industrial noise, heavy traffic, development, and permanent roads.

“This isn’t a bureaucratic footnote—it’s the wholesale elimination of protections for the backcountry habitat hunters and anglers depend on,” said Ryan Callaghan, President and CEO of Backcountry Hunters & Anglers in [a statement on Instagram](#). “The Roadless Rule works. It provides security habitat for big game, keeps trout streams cold and clean, and keeps taxpayers from footing the bill for thousands of miles of new roads the Forest Service can’t afford to maintain.”

In addition to supporting critical land habitat for hundreds of species of plants and animals, Roadless Areas protect no fewer than 80,000 miles of rivers and streams. [According to David Moryc](#), Senior Director of River Protection at American Rivers, “the Roadless Rule provides nearly 25 million Americans with low-cost, clean drinking water.”

That’s a public service that’s literally irreplaceable.

Three Republican governors of western states thought it was a politically smart idea to join Brooke Rollins in criticizing the Roadless Rule and praising its rescission today.

“For 25 years, the heavy thumb of Washington D.C. has hindered Montana’s ability to properly manage wildfire risk and road development on nearly 60 percent of Forest Service land across the Treasure State,” said Montana Governor Greg Gianforte. “Today’s long overdue decision will empower states like Montana to pursue proper forest management on federal lands with local communities in mind. I’m grateful to President Donald J. Trump and Secretary Rollins for their strong leadership in restoring common sense to active forest management.”

Utah Governor Spencer Cox, a [well-known anti-public-lands politician](#), echoed that sentiment, saying that “Utahns love our forests, and loving these places means taking care of them. For 25 years, the Roadless Rule has tied the hands of local land managers with a one-size-fits-all federal policy. Rescinding it restores the flexibility to make thoughtful decisions based on the needs of each forest and each community.”

And in Wyoming, Governor Mark Gordon said that the “USDA and USFS, under the leadership of Secretary Rollins and Chief Schultz, are doing great work recognizing our efforts [moving public lands closer to local management], making this trust a reality by rescinding the 2001 Roadless Rule. This step reflects a commitment to locally-driven, durable planning and empowering those who know these lands the best.”

A national survey commissioned by The Pew Charitable Trusts and [published back in February](#) shows overwhelming bipartisan support for the Roadless Rule—and overwhelming bipartisan opposition against rescinding it.

The poll showed that 76% of American voters are in favor of keeping the Roadless Rule.

“Support for the Roadless Rule is broad-based, bipartisan and includes strong majorities regardless of party affiliation, age, geographic region of the USA, ethnicity, gender, or educational background,” the poll’s explanatory text said.

“Among Republicans and Trump voters, 77% and 76% support the Roadless Rule, respectively.”

In 2000, the Forest Service’s deferred maintenance backlog was about \$8.4 billion. Now, it has ballooned to approximately \$11.2 billion, as per the Department of Agriculture’s [own FY 2027 Budget Request](#).

That’s literally a 25% increase *without constructing any new roads in Roadless Areas*.

Moreover, that same budget request reveals that the Trump administration wishes to reduce the Forest Service’s “capital improvement and maintenance” budget from \$153 million this fiscal year to only \$99 million in fiscal year 2027.

That’s a 35% cut to a construction and maintenance budget at a time when the maintenance backlog is historically high *and* they want to allow for *more* road construction.

None of this makes any financial, fiscal, or logical sense.

Secretary Rollins’ announcement today is the start of a 30-day public comment period.

If you care about Roadless Areas, the wildlife that calls them home, and the world-class recreation opportunities they provide—and if you care about how the federal government uses your hard-earned tax dollars—you can submit a personal comment from August 20 through September 21.

I will add a link to the Federal Register comment page once it’s live tomorrow, August 19.

If you’d like to see if this Trump administration rule rescission would affect any areas near where you live, you can find detailed state and even individual national forest maps [here on the USFS website](#).

Then, after you’ve submitted your comment, make sure to register to vote this November. *And actually vote.*