

# Committee on Resources

## Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

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### Witness Testimony

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WRITTEN STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD  
OF  
ERIC SORENSON,  
COLORADO TIMBER INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION  
BEFORE  
THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH  
APRIL 22, 1999

Thank you, Chairman Chenoweth and committee members, for the opportunity to comment on the "Forest Roads-Community Right-to-Know Act" from the perspective of western Colorado. I am Eric Sorenson, Vice-President and General Manager of Delta Timber in Delta, Colorado and I am here today representing the Colorado Timber Industry Association. I am a graduate forester and I have worked in the forest products industry in the western United States for the last 23 years. Delta Timber, like most other members of the Colorado forest products industry, has historically purchased the majority of its supply of timber from the national forests in Colorado. Consequently I have been actively involved in a wide range of national forest related plans and activities.

I cannot understate the importance of well-planned access to the national forests. A common thread among all national forest users, whether firewood cutters, hikers, loggers, cowboys, campers, or hunters and fishermen, is the need for access. Obviously, the Forest Service itself has access needs for management, including fire suppression, vegetative management, prescribed burning and all of the other programs necessary to implement the forest plans.

From my experience, nothing in the management of the national forests is more controversial than closing roads that have been used historically. It's very easy to close new roads. However, once a pattern of use has been started, roads become increasingly hard to close. I have heard the horror stories about road closures on the Targhee National Forest and I am appalled. To be honest, however, I have not seen that kind of abuse of the public trust here in western Colorado.

The development of the Forest Service's new roads policy, the requirements for a new roads analysis process, and the moratorium on road construction in roadless areas are having a significant effect on the management of the Grand Mesa-Uncompahgre-Gunnison (GMUG) National Forest. The way the Interim Rule is written, many projects on the GMUG NF have been deferred as a result of gerrymandered

"unroaded" areas. Many of our RARE II areas have existing roads; one recent timber sale on the GMUG NF even required obliteration of several miles of road inside a "roadless" area.

Additionally, part of the justification for new road closures is the maintenance backlog. While there may be a maintenance backlog, based on what I've seen in western Colorado, the magnitude has been wildly exaggerated, and the maintenance backlog gives the impression of being a surrogate issue to justify more road closures. The primary intent of these roads-related issues appears to be additional restrictions on the use of the Forests and obstruction of forest plan implementation.

The GMUG NF has spent the last ten years developing Travel Management Plans for the Grand Mesa and Uncompahgre portions of the Forest. This process has been quite contentious at times. The planning has included detailed public and community involvement, including public meetings with a road-by-road and trail-by-trail discussion. Part of this process has also included mediated meetings sponsored by the Delta-Montrose Public Lands Partnership, an extraordinary group representing a broad cross-section of public land interests. The process isn't completed, because the Forest Service hasn't yet made a final decision, but the GMUG NF's process provides a stark contrast to the Targhee NF. The downside is that the process has taken ten years, but the benefits are much more likely to include long-term public acceptance and support for the final decision.

I am puzzled as to how two different national forests, the Targhee NF and the GMUG NF, part of the same federal agency, can take such different approaches to road and travel management. Implementing travel management on the GMUG NF using the same tactics as used on the Targhee NF would have resulted in an outcry in western Colorado similar to what occurred in southern Idaho. While Chief Dombeck appears to advocate decisions made by local managers working with local communities, the reality appears to be increasing micro-management from Washington, D.C.

In his March 29, 1999 speech, the Chief announced his intention to increase the miles of road decommissioned in FY 2000 by 50%. This raises several concerns, but in particular, his apparent decision undermines development of the Forest Service's long-term road management plan. That plan, and decisions to close specific roads, were supposed to include public participation. Since it is obvious that the Chief has already made his decision, why should the public bother participating? This is the reason that the Forest Roads-Community Right-to-Know Act is necessary.

One of the objectives of the Travel Management Planning on the GMUG NF is to reduce the number of roads. I don't disagree that in some parts of the national forest we have too many roads, we have unnecessary roads, we have overbuilt roads, we have roads in poor locations, and we have poorly maintained roads. Sometimes the best solution to poorly located roads is to build a new road and decommission the old one, but that should be determined locally and not in Washington, D.C. The Forest Service has proposed a Roads Analysis process that will be required prior to decisions to build new roads. We must also ensure that the process to decommission or close roads is at least as rigorous as the process to build new roads and includes local public review and comment.

The GMUG NF completed a significant amendment to the forest plan in 1991 that reexamined the suitable land base, including roadless areas. Yet, even though the GMUG NF has taken a serious relook at roadless areas, and there have been wilderness areas designated on the GMUG NF in three different wilderness bills, and the GMUG NF has spent ten years working on travel and road management, they get slapped with the moratorium on new road construction just like most other national forests.

After talking to local Forest Service officials, my impression is that the Washington Office's plans to develop a new roads policy, to implement a new roads analysis process and to implement the interim moratorium on road building in roadless areas simply complicate matters. Clearly, the moratorium on road building in roadless areas didn't come from the bottom up. It's a top-down, politically driven directive that frankly undermines many years of planning and public involvement on the GMUG NF.

The bottom-line is that decisions about the management of the national forests should give the highest level of consideration to the people who live work and play on the national forests instead of a political appointee in Washington, D.C.

There would be three important outcomes from your proposed legislation. First, the agencies would be required to meet with State and local government officials once each fiscal year to discuss all plans or proposals that would result in road closures. Frankly, the Forest Service should be doing a far better job of meeting with State and local government officials on all types of projects as part of ensuring that the needs and desires of those entities are incorporated into the planning and decisionmaking process. Second, the bill would allay fears that local residents have about future road closures after an effort like the GMUG NF's Travel Management Plan is put into place. Third, our local county commissioners are concerned about their role in road closures resulting from their County's statutory rights relative to roads which existed prior to the creation of the national forests. This bill defines that role.

In summary, I don't like to advocate for new Congressional legislation, but I am very concerned about the increase in top-down directives from Washington, D.C. and the de-emphasis on decisions made by local managers working with local communities. I encourage you to move forward with your proposed legislation to ensure that the Forest Service listens to the voice of local publics as an integral part of their decision-making processes regarding road and travel management.

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