

Agriculture Secretary Rollins Rescinds the Roadless Rule

Trump Administration Opens 59 Million Forest Acres to Development

Executive Summary

On June 23, 2025, Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins announced the Trump administration would rescind the 2001 Roadless Rule, eliminating protections for 58.5 million acres of national forests—representing the most significant rollback of federal forest protections in decades. This decision opens nearly 30% of National Forest System lands to potential road construction, logging, and development, reversing 24 years of conservation policy that prohibited these activities on some of America's most pristine forests. The move directly contradicts scientific evidence showing roadless areas are nearly four times less likely to experience wildfire ignitions than roaded areas, while environmental groups have already promised immediate legal challenges. The rescission process will require extensive federal rulemaking including environmental review, Endangered Species Act compliance, and tribal consultation, likely taking 18-24 months to complete if it survives anticipated litigation.

Latest Development: August 27, 2025 - 21-Day Comment Period Opens

On August 27, 2025, Secretary Rollins announced the opening of a **21-day public comment period** for rescinding the Roadless Rule, with comments due by September

19, 2025. [USDA Press Release: Secretary Rollins Opens Next Step in the Roadless Rule Rescission](#)

The compressed timeline immediately drew criticism from environmental groups. Earthjustice and Sierra Club issued a joint statement declaring "Trump Administration Attempt to Repeal Roadless Rule Met With Widespread Opposition" [Earthjustice Sierra Club](#)

Major news coverage of the August 27 announcement includes: - [Anchorage Daily News: "Trump administration moves to remove Roadless Rule protecting national forests, including the Chugach and Tongass"](#) - [Yahoo News/LA Times: "Trump administration presses rollback of 'Roadless Rule' on wild lands"](#) - [Phys.org: "Trump administration presses rollback of 'Roadless Rule' on wild lands"](#) - [Santa Fe New Mexican: "Comment period set to open on ending 'roadless rule' on wildland areas"](#)

Additional coverage and analysis since August 26: - [Daily Fly News: "USDA Opens Public Comment on Proposal to Rescind 2001 Roadless Rule"](#) - [Western Kansas News: "Secretary Rollins Opens Next Step in the Roadless Rule Rescission"](#) - [Tucson Sentinel: "As Trump moves to undo 'Roadless Rule,' enviros ask Congress for stronger wilderness protections"](#)

Environmental organizations' responses to August 27 announcement: - [Center for Biological Diversity: "Trump Administration Moves to Kill National Forest Roadless Rule"](#) - [Greenpeace: "Here we go again – Trump administration begins process to repeal the Roadless Rule"](#) - [Earthjustice: "The Repeal of the Roadless Rule Threatens Our Wildest Public Lands"](#) - [Frontier Group: "Rescinding the Roadless Rule is an attack on America's future"](#)

The Roadless Rule Becomes a Political Battleground

Secretary Rollins made the announcement at the Western Governors' Association

meeting in Santa Fe, New Mexico, characterizing the Clinton-era rule as an "absurd obstacle" to forest management ([USDA Press Release](#)). The USDA framed the decision as essential for wildfire prevention, citing that **28 million acres** of the protected lands fall within high or very high wildfire risk zones. "It is abundantly clear that properly managing our forests preserves them from devastating fires and allows future generations of Americans to enjoy and reap the benefits of this great land," Rollins stated ([USDA](#)). The announcement aligns with President Trump's Executive Order 14192, "Unleashing Prosperity Through Deregulation," which requires agencies to eliminate regulatory barriers across federal programs.

Multiple news outlets covered the announcement extensively: - [NPR: "Trump to rescind 'Roadless Rule' protecting 58 million acres of forest land"](#) - [CBS News: "Trump administration plans to yank 'roadless rule' that impedes logging on 59 million acres"](#) - [Washington Post: "Trump to strip protections from millions of acres of national forests"](#) - [Montana Free Press: "Trump to rescind Roadless Rule, ending protections for 58 million acres nationwide"](#)

The 2001 Roadless Rule emerged from an unprecedented public engagement process that generated 1.8 million comments, with 95% supporting protection ([Wikipedia: Roadless area conservation](#)). Originally prompted by an **\$8.5 billion road maintenance backlog**, the rule prohibited most road construction and commercial timber harvest on inventoried roadless areas ([US Forest Service](#)). These lands encompass some of the nation's last wild forests, including **92% of Alaska's Tongass National Forest**, the world's largest intact temperate rainforest. The rule survived multiple legal challenges over two decades, with its final test coming in 2013 when a federal court rejected Alaska's challenge. Now the Trump administration seeks to overturn what environmental advocates call "one of the most significant conservation achievements in US history," setting up a fierce battle between development interests and conservation groups.

Environmental Groups Mobilize Immediate Legal Opposition

Conservation organizations responded with unified condemnation and promises of immediate litigation once formal rulemaking begins. Earthjustice attorney Drew Caputo declared unequivocally: "If the Trump administration actually revokes the roadless rule, we'll see them in court" ([Earthjustice Press Release](#)). The Wilderness Society's analysis directly contradicts the administration's wildfire prevention rationale, finding that **wildfires are nearly four times more likely to start in forest areas with roads** compared to roadless areas, as 85-94% of wildfires are human-caused and roads provide ignition sources ([Sierra Club](#)). Sierra Club's Alex Craven characterized the decision as a "corporate giveaway" that would put "60 million acres of wildlands across the country on the chopping block" to benefit timber and mining companies ([Sierra Club Press Release](#)).

Additional environmental opposition statements: - [Environment America: "Secretary Rollins proposes rescinding protections for roadless forests"](#) - [WildEarth Guardians: "Rescinding Roadless Rule one of several major Forest Service changes"](#) - [EcoWatch: "Trump Administration's Disdain for Nature Knows No Bounds"](#) - [Frontier Group: "Rescinding the Roadless Rule is an attack on America's future"](#)

The environmental coalition has emphasized multiple ecological values at stake beyond timber. These roadless areas provide drinking water for **60 million Americans**, contain portions of 354 municipal watersheds, and serve as critical habitat for over **1,600 threatened, endangered, or sensitive species** ([House Natural Resources Democrats](#)).

The Tongass alone stores 8% of all carbon in US forests, making it crucial for climate stability. Dr. William Moomaw, a five-time IPCC lead author, warned that without forests absorbing atmospheric carbon dioxide, current CO2 concentrations would have reached today's levels in the 1960s and "would be an unlivable 545 ppm instead of 427 ppm"

([CEPR Report](#)).

Congressional Democrats have introduced legislation to codify protections: - [Senate Bill 2042: Roadless Area Conservation Act of 2025](#) - [House Bill 3930: Roadless Area Conservation Act of 2025](#) - [Earthjustice Statement on Reintroduction of the Roadless Area Conservation Act](#)

Industry Celebrates Long-Sought Victory for Forest Access

Timber industry groups and Republican officials praised the decision as restoring "common sense" forest management after 24 years of restrictions. The American Forest Resource Council called the Clinton-era rule "a relic of the past" that has "failed to protect our forests," noting that 36 million acres of National Forest System lands have burned since its implementation ([USDA "What They Are Saying"](#)). Alaska Forest Association director Tessa Axelson emphasized the rule "contributed to the decline of the timber industry in Southeast Alaska for over twenty years" and limited critical access for mining and energy development ([North of 60 Mining News](#)).

Industry and political support coverage: - [Capital Press: "Trump rescinds Forest Service 2001 'Roadless Rule'"](#) - [DTN Progressive Farmer: "Ag Secretary Moves to Rescind 'Roadless Rule' on Forest Service Lands"](#) - [Tri-State Livestock News: "Rollins rescinds roadless rule: USDA Secretary de-regulates 24-year-old standard"](#) - [Washington Times: "Trump administration declares end of the road for Clinton-era roadless rule"](#) - [RedState: "USDA Rescinds Roadless Rule That Prevented Logging, Fire Management"](#)

Political support came swiftly from Western governors and congressional Republicans. Utah Governor Spencer Cox thanked Rollins for the "commonsense step," noting the rule blocked management of **four million acres** of Utah forest and prevented removing dead timber that fuels catastrophic wildfires ([USDA](#)). Montana Senator Steve Daines

called it a "huge win for Montana, forest management, and wildfire mitigation," while Alaska Senator Dan Sullivan emphasized it would allow Alaskans to "responsibly harvest timber, develop minerals, connect communities, or build energy projects at lower costs." The Forest Landowners Association praised removing "unnecessary barriers to active management," arguing it creates safer conditions for private forest landowners neighboring federal lands and strengthens America's wood supply chain.

Secretary Rollins also published an op-ed defending the decision: - [USDA: "Secretary Rollins Op-Ed in Deseret News on Repealing Roadless Rule"](#)

Regional Impacts Vary Dramatically Across Western States

Alaska faces the most dramatic changes, with **14.7 million roadless acres** representing 25% of the national total ([Alaska Beacon](#)). The Tongass National Forest alone contains over 9 million protected acres—92% of the forest—that would become accessible for logging and development. Governor Mike Dunleavy celebrated this as "another example of President Trump fulfilling his campaign promise to open up resources for responsible development." However, six Southeast Alaska tribal governments condemned the decision, with 96% of analyzed public comments supporting maintained protections ([Juneau Empire](#)).

Tongass-specific coverage: - [Earthjustice: "Tongass Defenders Blast the Trump Administration's Rollback"](#) - [Defenders of Wildlife: "U.S. Forest Service Moves to Eliminate Roadless Rule Protections in Alaska"](#) - [Alaska Public: "Alaskans react to Trump Administration's Roadless Rule rollback in the Tongass"](#)

Montana's **6.4 million roadless acres** represent 58% of its Forest Service lands ([Montana Free Press](#)), while Utah estimates the rule has caused a **25% decrease in forestry sector economic development** ([Salt Lake Tribune](#)). Wyoming contains 3.2

million affected acres, with both senators strongly supporting rescission.

Colorado coverage: - [Colorado Sun: "Millions of acres of Colorado forest under threat after Trump reverses longstanding roadless rule"](#)

Additional regional perspectives: - [Washington State Standard: "Forest Service plans to repeal rule that has blocked logging, mining"](#) - [Missoula Current: "Trump's elimination of roadless rule concerns conservationists"](#) - [Field & Stream: "Trump Administration to Rescind Roadless Rule Protections"](#)

Complex Regulatory Process Ahead Promises Extended Timeline

The rescission announcement marks only the beginning of an extensive federal rulemaking process that could take 18-24 months if uninterrupted by litigation ([The Smokey Wire](#)). USDA must publish a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, conduct a comprehensive Environmental Impact Statement under the National Environmental Policy Act, complete Endangered Species Act compliance reviews for affected species, engage in government-to-government tribal consultation, and coordinate with affected states. Each phase includes public comment periods, with the original 2001 rule generating a record 1.8 million comments.

Legal vulnerabilities appear significant given the Administrative Procedure Act's requirements and the rule's survival of previous challenges. The rescission must navigate interconnections with existing forest plans developed through extensive public participation, ESA protections for species like grizzly bears and bull trout that depend on roadless security, and tribal trust obligations. Forest policy expert Chris Wood notes the Forest Service currently faces a **\$10.8 billion deferred maintenance backlog** on existing roads, up from \$8.6 billion in 2023, raising questions about the logic of expanding infrastructure when current systems crumble ([CEPR](#)).

Wildfire Prevention Claims Disputed by Science

Recent opinion pieces and analyses have challenged the administration's core wildfire prevention rationale: - [National Parks Traveler: "Rescinding Roadless Rule Likely To Increase Wildfires"](#) - [The Wildlife News: "Rescinding Roadless Rule Likely To Increase Wildfires"](#)

These analyses note that roads provide ignition sources for human-caused fires, which account for 85-94% of all wildfire starts. The scientific consensus contradicts claims that roadless areas increase fire risk, instead showing roads multiply ignition sources and fragment fire-resilient landscapes.

Additional Resources

Educational and Context Articles

- [Sierra Club Oregon: "What is the Roadless Rule?"](#)
- [Wikipedia: Roadless area conservation](#)
- [US Forest Service: Roadless Areas](#)

Historical Context

- [Washington Post \(2021\): "Biden administration reinstates roadless rule for Alaska's Tongass National Forest"](#)

Additional Coverage

- [Daily Fly News: "USDA Rescinds Roadless Rule, Opening Forest Lands to Management and Development"](#)

Conclusion

The Roadless Rule rescission represents a fundamental realignment of federal forest policy, prioritizing timber production and local management flexibility over wilderness preservation and climate protection. While supporters frame it as essential for wildfire prevention and rural economic development, the scientific consensus contradicts claims that roadless areas increase fire risk, instead showing roads multiply ignition sources and fragment fire-resilient landscapes. The decision's ultimate fate depends on the Trump administration's ability to navigate complex legal requirements while withstanding anticipated litigation from environmental groups that have successfully defended the rule for over two decades.

Beyond immediate forest management implications, this policy reversal signals broader deregulatory priorities that could reshape conservation across federal lands. The coming months will test whether administrative determination can overcome procedural hurdles, tribal sovereignty concerns, and unified environmental opposition backed by significant public support. With 58.5 million acres hanging in the balance—from Alaska's carbon-rich Tongass to Montana's grizzly habitat to Utah's watershed forests—the roadless rule's fate will likely define forest conservation battles for the next generation, determining whether America's last wild forests remain protected refuges or become accessible resources for extraction and development.