

Federal panel weighs in on Colo. forest plan

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DENVER ([Map](#), [News](#)) - A federal panel has expressed concerns about Colorado's plan to manage about 4 million acres of roadless national forest land, but a state official says new recommendations could be still be incorporated.

An advisory panel appointed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to review state management plans for the roadless areas questioned some of the exemptions in Colorado's proposal during hearings Wednesday and Thursday in Washington, D.C.

The plan would allow temporary roads to reach livestock grazing areas, for wildfire prevention, expansion of existing coal mining and some utility infrastructure. It would also remove some ski area terrain from the inventory of roadless areas.

Environmental, hunting and fishing groups have urged Gov. Bill Ritter to withdraw the state plan because a 2001 roadless rule overturned by a federal court but reinstated in 2006 is stronger.

State natural resources deputy director Mike King, who attended the Washington hearings, said the Ritter administration believes there are benefits to a Colorado-specific plan that protects the land while accommodating some of the state's unique concerns.

State officials, though, are open to addressing concerns about some of the plan's exceptions, King said. The advisory panel, which makes recommendations to the agriculture secretary, likely will offer suggestions.

The Agriculture Department oversees the Forest Service.

"This rule is still subject to healthy debate," King said.

Public hearings on a draft environmental the plan will be held across the state starting Aug. 18. Comments will be accepted until Oct. 23.

Pam Kiely of Environment Colorado, who also went to Washington, said she hopes the federal panel will continue to weigh in on the state's plan. The panel gave valuable input to Idaho, whose plan protects the roadless areas better than Colorado's, Kiely said.

One sticking point with Colorado's proposal is the prospect of oil and gas leases being developed in roadless areas without restrictions. A report released last week by the Pew Environmental Group says at least 97 natural gas leases could go forward if Colorado adopts its plan.

Those leases were approved between a 2003 federal court ruling overturning the Clinton-era road-building ban and a 2006 federal court decision overturning a Bush administration policy and reviving the road ban.

Some mineral development is allowed under the road-building ban, but drilling must occur offsite. Temporary roads aren't allowed.

King said the state is also concerned about the possibility of mineral development with no restrictions on disturbing the surface. "We don't want to lessen those protections," he said.

But the Ritter administration continues to support the state roadless plan despite calls from environmentalists, hunters, anglers and outdoors business owners to shelf it.

A task force appointed by the Legislature and former Gov. Bill Owens wrote the plan after several meetings and public forums.

Owens, a Republican, submitted the plan to the federal government. Ritter, a Democrat elected in 2006, supported it with a few changes.

"It's in recognition of the really hard work the task force did," King said of Ritter's support for the plan.

Ritter has also backed the plan as an insurance policy because of ongoing legal challenges to the Clinton-era rule.

The 2001 roadless rule was passed near the end of the Clinton administration after more than two years of public hearings and 1.6 million comments. New roads were banned on about 58 million acres of the 192 million acres of forests nationwide.

Court challenges quickly followed. Federal Judge Clarence Brimmer in Cheyenne, Wyo., overturned the rule in 2003, saying the road ban illegally designated wilderness. Only Congress can set aside wilderness areas.

The Bush administration approved a policy in 2005, potentially opening the land to logging, road-building and other development. States were given 18 months to petition the federal government to protect some or all the land, and Colorado submitted a plan.

The Bush rule was tossed out and the Clinton rule reinstated in 2006 when U.S. District Judge Elizabeth Laporte of San Francisco said the Bush administration didn't conduct the necessary environmental reviews before adopting its policy.

Wyoming has revived its lawsuit against the Clinton-era policy and Brimmer is again presiding over the case. Whatever the outcome, the ruling likely will be appealed.

The land, some of which has trails or roads, is generally remote and considered important for wildlife habitat, watersheds, scenic and recreation areas.