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FORESTS: Forest Service releases draft EIS for Colo. roadless plan

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The Forest Service released a draft environmental impact statement last week for Colorado's roadless plan, which environmentalists say could allow oil and gas projects and other development on hundreds of thousands of acres.

The [draft statement](#) adopts most of a state task force's recommendations calling for most roadless areas to remain off-limits to energy development, designating more than 4 million acres of national forest as "Colorado Roadless Areas."

But the plan also would open about 300,000 acres to development, including new roads for wildfire protection, utility facilities and minerals development. Though the roads would be classified as "temporary," they could remain there for at least 10 years.

The provisions of the draft statement met criticism from the conservation community. "The Colorado rule is not only a giveaway to industry, it's an insult to the citizens of the state, 90 percent of whom asked for the strongest possible protections for the best of what's left of our backcountry," said Dave Petersen, Trout Unlimited's Colorado field director.

The proposed Colorado rule was negotiated by a state task force to ensure roadless protections for the state's national forests. In tossing out President Clinton's 2001 national roadless rule, the Bush administration asked states to determine which areas should remain roadless and to petition the Agriculture Department for their designation.

A federal court in California and the 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals threw out the Bush plan and reinstated the 2001 roadless rule. Only Colorado and Idaho are continuing with the process to establish their own roadless protections. Other states are relying on the 2001 rule to be upheld in federal court.

The proposed plan says it "provides slightly more opportunity" for access to oil and natural gas resources, while preserving the rights for existing leases in the roadless areas. The plan projects that there will be 670 oil and natural gas wells in the roadless areas over a 15-year period, along with 45 miles of new roads for coal mining.

The government has also sold more than 90 oil and gas leases in Colorado roadless areas since the Bush administration abandoned the 2001 rule. Though the leases cannot be

developed while the 2001 rule is still in effect, they could move forward under the Colorado plan.

Sharon Friedman, director of strategic planning for the Forest Service's Rocky Mountain Region, said these leases could be developed under the Colorado plan because they were leased when the forests were operating under their own forest plans after the Bush administration threw out the 2001 rule. Even if the 2001 rule is upheld in court, Colorado will not operate under it if the proposed rule is adopted.

The plan will be open for public comment for 90 days.

Friedman said the agency is working to complete a final rule before the Bush administration ends in January, but it is not necessary to finish it earlier. "It's better to get it done right than done quick," she said. "Nevertheless, it's important to get it done."

[Click here](#) to view the draft EIS.