



Roads in Managed Forests

A Position Statement of the Society of American Foresters

Originally adopted by the SAF Council on February 20, 1998, this position statement was revised and renewed by the Council on June 13, 1999, October 1, 2004 and December 5, 2009. It will expire on December 5, 2014 unless after subsequent review it's further extended by the SAF Council.

Position Summary

The Society of American Foresters (SAF) believes forest roads provide vital access for managing and sustaining our nation's federal, state, private and tribal forestlands. Strategies and practices to maintain healthy and productive forests for present and future generations, such as forest thinning and harvesting, prescribed burning and habitat and watershed improvement, require access on well-constructed and maintained road systems. To provide for most of society's environmental, economic and social needs from forest lands, access by permanent or temporary road systems is essential.

Forest road systems on national forests and other public lands provide important access for public recreational use and enjoyment as well as firefighting and search & rescue operations. Forest managers must have the ability to restrict use of forest roads when necessary to ensure public safety, prevent wildlife disturbance, protect threatened or endangered species, or meet other resource management objectives. SAF also believes that some roadless federal lands merit protection due to their unique qualities, but also recognizes that active forest management to address forest health or other problems can be accomplished and still maintain the roadless character of these areas.

Issues

To address concerns about the resource effects of forest roads, SAF promotes the use of Best Management Practices (BMPs) to protect water quality, as well as fish and wildlife habitats. BMPs, along with ongoing monitoring and research, can target specific design features and methods that effectively limit surface erosion and mass soil failures, provide for safe storm flows, fish passage through culverts and other environmental safeguards. Most states have thorough BMPs in place, either mandatory or voluntary, with high compliance rates.

SAF believes that some roadless areas on federal lands have special qualities that deserve

protection, while other areas are in serious need of prudent management to control insects and disease or reduce hazardous fuels to prevent catastrophic wildfire and protect communities, watersheds, and wildlife habitat. Decisions regarding management of roadless areas should be informed by good data, high quality maps and other visuals, and should be taken with a high level of stakeholder involvement at the local level, with opportunities for input from national stakeholders on policy-level questions.

Decisions must carefully account for the environmental, social and economic costs and benefits of including or excluding forest road systems. Some roadless areas are a part of landscapes that need restoration and land managers need flexibility to appropriately manage these lands while maintaining their roadless character. SAF favors allowing professional foresters and other land-management experts to choose from a range of management options, consistent with valid forest plans or other processes involving stakeholder input. This includes, in some cases, the limited use of temporary roads to provide safe, efficient access into roadless areas, while exercising great care to protect the characteristics that make these forests so special.

Given the opportunity to revisit the nation-wide rulemaking regarding roadless federal forests, the U.S. Forest Service should take the opportunity to improve the quality of the data used to support the national rule. All maps used to create the 2001 Roadless Rule should be field checked by qualified personnel and be reviewed by local stakeholders. Further, beyond simply identifying roadless areas for purposes of setting them aside, the agency should take the opportunity to exert leadership over the road funding issue. The model of forest road construction and maintenance being funded largely through receipts from commodity timber sales is outdated and no longer fits the reality of the greatly reduced timber sale program. Managers are finding restoration projects with a commercial timber component are difficult to implement because of the low value of wood offered for sale and the considerable road maintenance or reconstruction work included in the contracts. The agency should firmly assert that given the high percentage of recreational traffic in many areas relative to resource or timber management traffic dictates that the bulk of the agency's road management and maintenance funding should come from the Federal Highway Trust Fund and increases in road maintenance line item funding and other sources, not from internally generated receipts.

Due to the lack of funding for roads, Federal land managers should also look at new and innovative ways to address road maintenance, decommissioning and removal. Tools such as stewardship contracting, among others, can be used with road funding to restore or maintain roads while also conducting forest restoration projects. Though this is only part of the solution to the road issue, it helps maximize the amount of work done with less funding.

Background

Historical Perspective

As railroad logging declined in the 1930s and '40s, an extensive network of access roads began to evolve on forest lands, first on more accessible private lands and later, as demand for wood products greatly increased following World War II, on federal and state lands. Although forest roads were built primarily to facilitate timber harvest and log transport, the expanding road system significantly improved fire protection and provided access for more effective forest management and to fulfill the multiple-use mission of federal agencies.

Forest roads became popular with the public, who used the improved access to public lands for outdoor recreation. By fiscal year 2000, recreation had become the largest single use of the national forest road system, accounting for 90 percent of the daily traffic (USDA Forest Service 2000). Although the Wilderness Act of 1964 reflected a different view of some unique areas, the public generally regarded the expanding road system on other federal lands as a desirable feature as it enhanced access for recreation opportunities.

Environmental concerns

Beginning in the 1970s, there was a growing recognition that road construction could have adverse environmental impacts, particularly on water quality. The Clean Water Act Amendments of 1972 identified forest roads as a nonpoint source of pollution and increased attention at both the federal and state levels to road construction and maintenance practices on private and state and local forest lands. During the 1970s, some states—including California, Oregon and Washington—enacted state forest practices laws with specific road construction and maintenance requirements. Other states, with federal technical and financial assistance, began developing forest road BMPs for private, state and local forest lands. By the 1990s, states in the South developed either enforceable or voluntary BMPs designed to improve water quality associated with silvicultural activities, with emphasis on reducing sediment related to forest roads (Wear and Gries 2002). Improved road construction and maintenance practices on these forest lands was further promoted by forest certification programs such as the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) (Wallinger 2003) and the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) (Washburn and Miller 2003).

For over a decade, extensive public debate, media coverage, and litigation over administrative rulemaking and extensive roadless area proposals, together with policy efforts to more effectively address forest health and wildfire concerns, have highlighted the issue of the role of forest road systems on federal forest lands. Some concerns about forest roads stem from a lack of distinction between multiple-use forests, where roads are a key part of the management infrastructure, and wilderness and other areas where roads are prohibited by congressional action or administrative decisions. Confusion about these very different forest classifications results partly from the complex array of laws and agency administrative rules that affect roads

and management on federal land. Well-publicized protests, appeals and legal challenges to agency decisions have added to the confusion as these actions have sought roadless designations largely as a means of stopping timber sales, salvage logging, or other projects. A broadening of natural resource concerns on federal forests, as well as limited budgets for road maintenance, has required federal managers to assess existing road systems to determine if older roads are compatible with current resource goals, legal mandates, and budget needs. This has resulted in decisions to decommission roads or restrict motor vehicle access to protect wildlife or other resources, but also has raised concerns among recreational groups that use forest roads. Closed or decommissioned roads many times need removal or restoration (removal of culverts that can block fish passage, etc.) to protect soil and water quality. The availability of funding for this work is not adequate, but if combined with other forest restoration projects that generate revenue, costs of road removal can be reduced. In addition, forestry professionals recognize that permanent road closures can seriously limit management for multiple benefits as well as responses to catastrophic events (e.g., wildfire).

Private, state, and local lands

On private forests and on public forests managed by state and local governments, the combined effects of existing state-sanctioned BMPs, state forest practices regulations, formal voluntary programs in other states and initiatives such as the SFI and FSC programs have substantially improved forest road construction and maintenance practices over the past three decades. In addition, development of the forest road system on these ownership categories is largely complete. The remaining challenge for private forest owners and nonfederal public land managers is to adequately maintain the existing road system and remedy substandard legacy roads. Further monitoring and research can aid in identifying the most cost-effective practices to address these needs.

References

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