

Roadless area demise degrades the Wilderness System

— *By Howie Wolke*

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We all knew what was going on but could do little to stop it. Most citizens were either indifferent or oblivious. It was a cold-blooded, systematic program perpetrated by a dedicated government cadre, a tragedy of momentous proportions.

In a 1984 interview with Public Land News, then Forest Service Chief Max Peterson came clean with the statement that "We generally road probably one to two million acres (of unprotected roadless area) per year." That's at least a million acres of roadless de-facto "small w" national forest wilderness – about the size of Montana's Glacier National Park – annually down the tubes. In recent years, the rate of national forest roadless area demise has slowed, although the Bush administration plans to renew the assault. Unfortunately, the assault on our roadless lands is not limited to areas managed by the Forest Service. On lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), roadless area bulldozing continues unabated, and throughout most of the public domain an explosion of ATV abuse threatens nearly every acre that is not designated Wilderness.

Turn the clock back to the early 1950's and the post-war housing boom. Although national forests could and would never contribute much over 10% of the nation's annual sawlog cut (that figure is now under 5%), Forest Service officials wanted a piece of the action. Thus they set the bulldozers in motion by soliciting timber companies to build mills near national forests. In 1952, Chief Christopher Granger boasted that the upsurge in Forest Service logging was due to "the initiative of Forest Service men going out and getting business." Since World War II, America has lost roughly 40 million acres of rich, magnificent forest wildland that otherwise might have become part of the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). In addition, millions of acres of BLM, National Park, and National Wildlife Refuge wildlands have also been developed. Roadless area loss to roadbuilding, logging, mining, ATVs, intensive livestock use, and resort development creates many well-documented problems. Problems such as erosion and weed infestation, habitat fragmentation, loss of old growth and wilderness dependent species, demise of native fisheries, loss of native biodiversity, increased poaching and road kill, loss of solitude, and the loss of the general essence of places that have harbored native life for centuries. Conservation biologists proclaim that as wild habitats shrink and become more isolated, species will disappear and ecosystems unravel. Our unprotected roadless areas form a protective hedge against this trend, yet they cannot perform this duty without protection.

Now, turn the clock forward and imagine a future in which this unprotected roadless domain has been squandered. Aside from the ecological ramifications outlined above, to where will the non-motorized users of these lost wilds go for recreation? To designated Wilderness, that's where. Those who formerly hunted, fished, backpacked, camped,

horsepacked or ski toured in silent wild unprotected places will inevitably turn to what will be the only remaining realm of wild country, the National Wilderness Preservation System.

In the lower 48 states, where most of us live, there are about twice as many unprotected public land roadless acres (over 90 million) as acres of designated Wilderness (roughly 40 million). It's easy to see future demand for designated Wilderness recreation dramatically increasing – perhaps doubling – in response to roadless area loss. Sadly, with increased user demand comes a corresponding increase in all of the known impacts, conflicts, and restrictions that must be imposed in futile and controversial efforts to keep designated Wilderness wild. Wilderness will suffer more eroded and compacted trails and campsites, more litter and fecal contamination, more wildlife displacement, more horses and more weeds, and less silence and solitude, more required permits and so on. Add to this equation our nation's expanding population, and a potentially grim scenario for the future Wilderness system emerges. That's why it is so important for those working for better Wilderness stewardship to support the efforts of those who work to protect threatened roadless areas.

By the same token, much of the conservation movement behaves as though designated Wilderness is safe from abusive practices, ignoring the increasingly widespread degradation of the NWPS. Wilderness Watch and others focused upon Wilderness stewardship need more support from those whose primary mission is to protect roadless areas and secure new Wilderness designations. As one who works with both Wilderness Watch and various organizations focused upon new Wilderness designations, I see cooperation between the two approaches essential to the future of American Wilderness.

In other words, we Wilderness lovers are all in the same tiny boat. Our shrinking public land Wilderness domain – designated and de-facto – is under assault from a rapidly expanding human population that on a global scale already converts about 40% of the earth's terrestrial net primary production to human biomass and its support facilities. That in itself is reason enough to designate every single acre of qualifying wildland as big W protected Wilderness, the only land designation we have that safeguards public wildlands from a juggernaut that knows no bounds, and to make certain that Wilderness is administered to the highest standards possible.