

April 2026

## Roadless Areas in Our National Forests Save Billions in Taxpayer Costs



Tongass National Forest | Adobe Stock

The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) manages 193 million acres of public forests and grasslands collectively known as the National Forest System.<sup>1</sup> These lands provide significant benefits to all Americans, and many areas remain remote and largely unroaded.

In 2001, the Forest Service adopted the Roadless Area Conservation Rule (Roadless Rule), which prohibits road construction, road reconstruction, and timber harvesting in inventoried roadless areas. The rule covers approximately 44.7 million acres of National Forest System lands<sup>2</sup> across 38 states and Puerto Rico, with the majority located in Western states and Alaska.<sup>3</sup>

Many inventoried roadless areas are undeveloped and lack access roads for large-scale logging. The Roadless Rule was issued in part to protect these areas from the high costs and negative impacts of road construction and timber harvesting, as well as the long-term financial burden of road maintenance.<sup>4</sup> If these areas were developed, the costs of administering timber sales, subsidizing road construction, and maintaining roads would fall to American taxpayers. Historically, timber sales have cost more to administer than they generate, offering little prospect of meaningful or sustained revenue from expanded roadbuilding.

---

*If these areas were developed, the costs of administering timber sales, subsidizing road construction, and maintaining roads would fall on American taxpayers.*

---

### Repealing the Roadless Rule would:

- Cost taxpayers billions in subsidized road construction and maintenance
- Exacerbate taxpayer losses from money-losing timber sales
- Increase wildfire risks and the associated costs borne by taxpayers
- Harm forest health and threaten recreational benefits that roadless areas provide to the American public

## High Taxpayer Cost of Road Construction and Maintenance

Taxpayers frequently shoulder the costs of building and maintaining roads in the Forest Service system, along with the long-term liabilities they create. USFS often relies on appropriated funds to cover these costs.<sup>5</sup> Repealing the Roadless Rule would expose taxpayers to additional road construction and maintenance costs—federal spending that would come at the expense of higher-priority needs such as wildfire risk reduction, watershed restoration, insect and disease prevention, recreation, and other local priorities.

The Forest Service already manages more than 368,000 miles of roads across the National Forest System,<sup>6</sup> many built to enable timber access. When taxpayers cover roadbuilding costs, it improves the economics of timber sales for logging companies but significantly increases the overall cost of the Forest Service’s timber program. In the Tongass National Forest, for example, roadbuilding and maintenance accounted for roughly 40 percent of timber-related expenses between fiscal years 2000 and 2019.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, USFS lacks the resources to maintain its existing road system<sup>8</sup> and reports a \$10.8 billion deferred maintenance backlog, \$5.98 billion of which is for roads.<sup>9</sup> Adding new roads without dedicated funding would only deepen this backlog and divert resources from higher-priority needs.

---

*Repealing the Roadless Rule would expose taxpayers to additional road construction and maintenance costs—federal spending that would come at the expense of higher-priority needs such as wildfire risk reduction, watershed restoration, insect and disease prevention, recreation, and other local priorities.*

---

## Mounting Taxpayer Losses from Federal Timber Sales

High roadbuilding expenses are only part of the cost of preparing timber sales. The Forest Service typically spends years selecting suitable stands, thinning them when necessary, analyzing environmental effects of various harvest options, calculating financial viability, advertising sales, and evaluating bids from logging companies. In many cases, the agency must also construct or

reconstruct roads to access the timber. These costs—spread across multiple budget line items—directly reduce the net return from timber sales.

The Forest Service’s own record shows these sales have long been money-losing propositions. In the Tongass National Forest, the agency spent \$1.96 billion on its timber sale program from FY1980 to 2019 but collected only \$227 million in receipts, resulting in a net loss of \$1.73 billion.<sup>10</sup> Much of the timber in other inventoried roadless areas is located in remote, inaccessible landscapes, where logging would be costly and difficult—meaning sales are likely to require road construction and other subsidies. Repealing the Roadless Rule would only deepen these losses across the National Forest System.



*Brock Martin, United States Forest Service | Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons*

## **Increasing Wildfire Risks and Suppression Liabilities**

Evidence suggests that eliminating the Roadless Rule and expanding roadbuilding in currently roadless areas would likely increase wildfire ignition risks and associated federal spending, while doing little to improve mitigation or suppression outcomes.

Wildfire science consistently shows that human activity is the leading cause of wildfire ignitions, accounting for 84% of all ignitions in the U.S.<sup>11</sup> Because roads increase human access, wildfire ignitions are far more common near road networks—three times more common within 0–250 meters of roads, according to a nationwide analysis of wildfire ignitions on national forests between 1992 and 2024. Overall wildfire frequency follows a similar pattern, with four times as many wildfires occurring within 50 meters of roads compared to wilderness and roadless areas.<sup>12</sup>

Any potential advantages new roads may provide, including improved firefighter access—a point frequently made to support more roadbuilding in roadless areas—should be carefully weighed against the increased risks of human-caused ignitions in roaded areas and the long-term liabilities taxpayers must absorb for road construction and maintenance.

The Roadless Rule has not prevented wildfire mitigation activities. The rule includes exemptions allowing road construction and other actions when necessary to protect public health and safety from imminent wildfire threats. It also allows thinning and removal of small-diameter trees to restore forest structure or reduce wildfire risk. The lack of roads has not prevented or slowed fire management activities. Forest Service data show more fuel management activities per square kilometer in inventoried roadless areas than elsewhere in the National Forest System.<sup>13</sup> In recent years, nearly 2 million acres of roadless areas have been treated to reduce fire risk.<sup>14</sup> In 2023, the Forest Service approved all 59 proposed projects in Tongass inventoried roadless areas—most within one month.<sup>15</sup>

---

*The Roadless Rule has not prevented wildfire mitigation activities.*

---

Allowing timber harvests will not necessarily reduce wildfire risks. Harvest locations are often determined by commercial viability and other local conditions rather than fire risk. Fuels that increase fire risk—such as slash after logging, dry brush, and dead trees—typically provide little economic value and are often better addressed in other ways, such as through prescribed fire.

## Forest Health and Recreational Benefits

Inventoried roadless areas play an integral role in supporting ecosystem health and the communities that depend on them. These areas help maintain high-quality watersheds that protect downstream communities from flooding, provide public drinking water, and supply clean water for agricultural and industrial uses—all of which provide substantial economic benefits.

They also sustain fish and wildlife populations and preserve biodiversity. For example, in Utah, over 99% of roadless areas are designated by the state as crucial or substantial habitat for mule deer and nearly 87% for elk.<sup>16</sup> Sport, commercial, and subsistence fishing and hunting contribute billions of dollars annually to local economies, while tourism and recreation add billions more.<sup>17</sup>

Increased road construction and timber harvesting also damage watersheds, introduce invasive species, fragment habitats, and disrupt overall forest health, which could lead to higher long-term costs and liabilities for taxpayers down the road.

## Roadless Rule Protects Taxpayers

The record is clear — roadless areas in our national forests benefit federal taxpayers and local communities. Repealing the Roadless Rule would cost taxpayers billions in subsidized road construction and maintenance, exacerbate taxpayer losses from money-losing timber sales, increase wildfire risks and the associated costs borne by taxpayers, and weaken the health of roadless areas that provide important commercial and recreational benefits to the American public.

---

<sup>1</sup> Congressional Research Service (CRS), “National Forest System Management: Overview and Issues for Congress,” May 2023. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R43872>

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Forest Service (USFS), “Notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement,” 90 FR 42179, August 2025. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/08/29/2025-16581/special-areas-roadless-area-conservationnational-forest-system-lands>

<sup>3</sup> Every state except Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Iowa, Kansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, and Rhode Island. Source: USFS, “Roadless Areas Inventoried by State,” accessed April 9, 2026. <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/planning/roadless/state-maps>

<sup>4</sup> CRS, “Forest Service Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRAs),” August 2020. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R46504>

<sup>5</sup> The Forest Service may require timber purchasers to perform or pay for construction of roads for the timber harvest. Source: 16 U.S.C. § 535(2)

<sup>6</sup> USFS, “National Forest System Statistics Fiscal Year 2024,” April 2025.

[https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/fs\\_media/fs\\_document/FY24-forest-system-stats.pdf](https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/fs_media/fs_document/FY24-forest-system-stats.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Taxpayers for Common Sense (TCS), “Cutting Our Losses after 40 Years of Money-Losing Timber Sales in the Tongass,” September 2020, <https://www.taxpayer.net/energy-natural-resources/cutting-our-losses-tongass-timber-2/>

<sup>8</sup> USFS, “National Forest System Statistics Fiscal Year 2024,” April 2025.

[https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/fs\\_media/fs\\_document/FY24-forest-system-stats.pdf](https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/fs_media/fs_document/FY24-forest-system-stats.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> USFS, “Fiscal Year 2025, Quarter 2 Deferred Maintenance Needs,” accessed September 2025.

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/fy25-q2-deferred-maint-report.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Excluding FY1991, as budget data was not available.

<sup>11</sup> Cattau M E, Wessman C, Mahood A and Balch J K, “Anthropogenic and lightning-started fires are becoming larger and more frequent over a longer season length in the U.S.A.,” *Glob. Ecol. Biogeogr.* 29 668–81, April 2020.

[https://scholarworks.boisestate.edu/hes\\_facpubs/43/](https://scholarworks.boisestate.edu/hes_facpubs/43/)

<sup>12</sup> Aplet, G.H., Hartger, P. & Dietz, M.S. Three-decade record of contiguous-U.S. national forest wildfires indicates increased density of ignitions near roads. *fire ecol* 22, 8 (2026). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s42408-026-00450-2>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Dombeck, Bosworth, Tidwell, & Christiansen, September 2025

<https://subscriber.politicopro.com/eenews/f/eenews/?id=00000199-5913-d7f0-ab99-7ddb30c0000>

<sup>15</sup> USFS, “Special Areas; Roadless Area Conservation; National Forest System Lands in Alaska,” 36 CFR 294, January 2023. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2023/01/27/2023-01483/special-areas-roadless-area-conservation-national-forest-system-lands-in-alaska>

<sup>16</sup> Trout Unlimited, “Roadless: America’s Sporting Lands,” March 2026. <https://www.tu.org/roadless-report/>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.