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Coloradans bring 20 Questions to National Forest open houses, call on Bush administration to play by roadless rules

PUEBLO, CO—In response to a rulemaking from the Bush administration that would put roads through Colorado's remaining backcountry and increase drilling in pristine roadless areas, Coloradans will raise "20 Questions" here and around the state this week to expose the contradictions and gaps in the plan.

The U.S. Forest Service is hosting a series of meetings called "open houses," in which citizens' comments are not formally tallied or voiced aloud, contrasting sharply with a similar process underway in Idaho where citizens turned out in force to voice their concerns on the record.

Here in Pueblo today as well as Tuesday in Monte Vista, Wednesday in Durango and Thursday in Golden, citizens will play a version of "20 Questions" to highlight that there are too many unanswered details about what this proposed rule would do to Colorado's unmarred backcountry.

"The rulemaking raises too many questions, and the answers we do have are unacceptable," said Michael Rogers with Wild Connections, a group that follows issues on the Pike-San Isabel National Forests, subject of the Pueblo open house. "That's why we're encouraging people to turn out at these meetings to be sure that Colorado's backcountry is protected, as Gov. Ritter and the people have called for."

Among the questions that citizens will raise are:

"What are long-term temporary roads and wouldn't they require regular maintenance and reconstruction?"

"Is it correct that logging in Colorado's roadless areas will be roughly 10 times what they are under the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule?"

"Why will roads be allowed on some oil and gas leases issued while the 2001 Roadless Rule was in effect?"

"Why did the Bush administration decide to abandon the public hearings that have been a long-standing part of federal rulemakings and replace them with the "open house" format?"

If the proposed rulemaking goes forward:

- Colorado's national forest backcountry would be open to a wide array of industrial activity and, in some case, almost unlimited logging.
- New oil and gas drilling, pipeline and power line construction, and expanded coal mining, would make Colorado's roadless areas less protected than any other national forests in the Lower 48.

- In classic Washington doublespeak, “long-term temporary” roads – lasting up to 30 years or longer– could be carved into backcountry now protected as roadless, to allow for logging, mining and drilling.
- New roads could be built to access oil and gas leases that were sold after the 2001 Roadless Rule. These leases—which would provide, at most, about two weeks worth of natural gas for the country –are currently blocked from road building, and new roads could irreparably harm important wildlife habitat, watersheds and recreation areas.

“Colorado’s roadless areas make up much of the heart of the wild areas left in the Rockies, and, with this rulemaking, millions of acres could be opened to timber, oil and gas, and other special interests.” said Kurt Kunkle, field inventory director with the Colorado Environmental Coalition, one of the groups organizing around the roadless open houses. “The interests of the public, our forests, and the clean water and secure wildlife habitat they provide should be given top consideration. But if this rulemaking goes forward, Colorado’s roadless forests would be managed to a lesser standard than other states.”

The 2001 federal roadless rule, developed after years of scientific study, more than 600 public hearings across the country and 1.6 million official comments, has received more public support than any other federal rulemaking in history. In Colorado, it protects 4.4 million acres of high quality roadless backcountry.

Under the current ‘public involvement’ plan Coloradans will not be given the opportunity to attend any hearings on this rulemaking, which affects over 4 million acres of unroaded forest backcountry and quality hunting, fishing and recreation grounds. Written comments can be submitted until October 23.

At the open houses, in addition to the 20 Questions, there will also be a three-foot-wide “wish you were here” postcard to sign, addressed to Teddy Roosevelt, the 26th President of the United States, in honor of his dedication to the protection of America’s national forests, and in recognition of his role in founding 150 of these treasured places over 100 years ago.

The Pueblo open house is from 5-8:30 PM at CSU-Pueblo 2200 Bonforte Boulevard
For all open house locations, go to <http://roadless.fs.fed.us/colorado.shtml>

For more information on the effort to protect Colorado’s roadless areas, go to <http://www.roadless.net>

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