

The roadless rule, promulgated in the Clinton Administration, but not free from litigation until the first term of the Obama Administration, set aside about 2% of the land area of the lower 48 United States from commercial development. It applies to roadless areas of National Forests, and prohibits commercial logging and road construction in those areas. The Trump Administration has started the process of repealing it.

What is the Trump Administration's argument for repeal? The [notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement](#) for the repeal highlights "shifts in policy priorities," and "refocused policies, programs, and resources on increasing rural economic opportunity, decreasing Federal regulation, and streamlining Federal government services." It also argues that repeal of the rule is required to allow for active management in roadless areas to reduce fire risk: "Management flexibility is needed for the Agency to achieve its multiple use conservation mission, including timber production, recreation, wildfire suppression, and fuel reduction treatments."

The fire risk argument, however, does not really have a lot of traction. First, consider that the proposed repeal would leave in place the state-specific roadless rules implemented in Idaho and Colorado in the mid 2000s. Do those areas not also require "management flexibility" to advance "wildfire suppression and fuel reduction treatments"? If not, why are the conditions so different in those states than others (answer: they're not). Perhaps the borders of those protected areas are better suited for allowing that management flexibility where needed, or the provisions in these special rules allow the kind of flexibility needed for active management - if so, the all or nothing approach of repeal in all of the other states is inappropriate. Better to do the same kind of tailoring to adjust what is protected, as in Idaho and Colorado.

Second, while it is true that not all "Inventoried Roadless Areas" (the areas to which the roadless rule applies) are free from roads, it is generally true that the areas covered by the roadless rule do not have a lot of roads. That means access for active management is limited and costly. Which means that it may well not be very feasible, [as past fire policy research has made clear](#). Of course, one could build roads to facilitate more active management. But that has two implications, neither of which appear to be considered in the proposal. First, building roads is also costly - and it's not clear that the cost of constructing and maintaining those roads is worth the benefits we would get from active management in what is often quite remote locations. Unless the plan is not to do fire reduction, but instead large-scale commercial timber operations that might pay for those roads (but also can often

increase fire risk!). Second, it turns out that adding roads to a landscape can increase fire risk. While road access may make it easier to do active management, including suppression of fires, it also means more human access to forests. And where there are more humans, there are more ignitions that start fires. [Something like 80% of all wildfires in the United States start from human ignitions](#). So more roads may well make the fire problem worse.

The Administration can make arguments about needing to do more timber harvesting in National Forests, and how that outweighs the ecological and recreational benefits of protecting roadless areas. But a claim that a blanket repeal of the roadless rule will help with fire risk is on shaky ground.