

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

September 19, 2025

The Honorable Brooke Rollins
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Rollins:

As the elected representatives in the United States Congress for New Mexico, we write to request that our state be excluded from the current effort to rescind the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule. The Roadless Rule affects nearly 1.6 million acres of the National Forest System in New Mexico, protecting them from new permanent road construction and preserving them for outdoor recreation enthusiasts. It was the result of a vigorous debate over the course of decades, more than 600 public meetings during its development, and 1.6 million public comments. We are concerned that rolling back this rule would hurt our state's economy, diminish its wildlife, and endanger its residents.

The principal purpose of designating portions of the National Forest System as roadless is to manage them for unconfined recreation (36 C.F.R. 294.1(a)). According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, the outdoor recreation economy generates \$3.2 billion in New Mexico and supports nearly 30,000 jobs. Many of these outdoor enthusiasts specifically seek out our state due to its extraordinary opportunities for unconfined, backcountry activities. Diminishing these opportunities likely would have a profound negative impact on the state's economic future. Roads also damage the habitat for many species of wildlife prized by sportsmen and the recreation community; they lower habitat connectivity and are associated with higher wildlife mortality, lower reproduction rates, and generally lower population viability.^{1,2} Many large mammals' movements are disrupted by roads and traffic, including deer, elk, black bears, and bighorn sheep. Studies have found that jaguars, which are native to New Mexico, selectively avoid habitat within 2.8 miles from roads.³ That is why, in 2019, the New Mexico legislature enacted the *Wildlife Corridors Act* to prioritize areas important for wildlife movement and habitat. Rolling back roadless area status will only impede these efforts to conserve and restore our native species.

The creation of new roads in unroaded areas also would pose a significant risk to public safety in our state. New Mexico is particularly vulnerable to wildfire, with a risk profile higher than 82% of the United States. Multiple studies, including those conducted by the federal government, have confirmed that wildfires are much less likely to ignite in roadless areas.⁴ The administration's goal of faster deployment of suppression

¹ Federal Highway Administration. Impacts of Roads on Wildlife Populations (2011). Publication No. FHWA-CFL/TD-11-003. *Wildlife Crossing Structure Handbook Design and Evaluation in North America*.
https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/clas/ctip/wildlife_crossing_structures/ch_2.aspx

² Lamb, CT, et al. (2018). Effects of habitat quality and access management on the density of a recovering grizzly bear population. *J. Appl. Ecol.* **55**(3). Pg. 1407-1417. Doi:10.1111/1365-2664.13056

³ Endangered and Threatened Wildland and Plants; Designation of Critical Habitat for Jaguar, 79 FR 12572 (March 5, 2014) (promulgating the final rule), citing Zarza, et al (2007).

⁴ See, eg., Healey, SP. (2020). Long-term forest health implications of roadlessness. *Environ. Res. Lett.* **15** 104023. Doi:10.1088/1748-9326/aba031

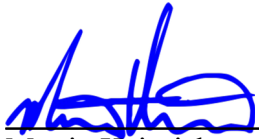
resources must be compared against the reality that more fires will ignite when roads are added. Additionally, Forest Service research has shown that forest roads are also associated with increased frequency of landslides, especially in post-wildfire environments.⁵ Our state recently experienced a federally-declared disaster for flooding and landslides (FEMA Declaration DR-4886-NM) due to the after-effects of the 2024 South Fork and Salt wildfires. Increasing the number of wildfire ignitions and landslides in our state would disproportionately impact poor and rural New Mexicans.

The National Forest System also supplies nearly half of the surface water in the West, including more than 75 percent of the water for Albuquerque and Santa Fe, New Mexico.⁶ Road construction and use, especially in the backcountry, is tightly linked to increase dust and runoff that would threaten these critical watersheds as well as diminish aquatic habitat important for our native fish and amphibians.⁷

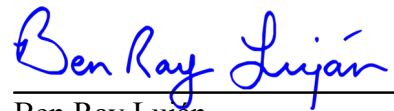
Lastly, we understand that the Forest Service is undertaking this rulemaking in part to support a struggling timber industry. We note that the Roadless Rule already allows for timber harvest if conducted for ecological or wildfire mitigation purposes. In fact, roadless areas represent approximately 21 percent of the forest lands within the National Forest System, but they account for 34 percent of the total fuel treatment activities.⁸

We strongly believe that the Roadless Rule has had an overall positive impact on New Mexico, from protecting communities from wildfire, promoting a healthy environment, and supporting the outdoor recreation economy. We therefore request that any rule seeking to rescind the Roadless Rule nationwide nevertheless preserve these management guidelines within our state.

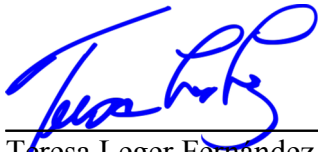
Sincerely,



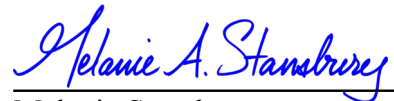
Martin Heinrich
United States Senator



Ben Ray Lujan
United States Senator



Teresa Leger Fernandez
Member of Congress



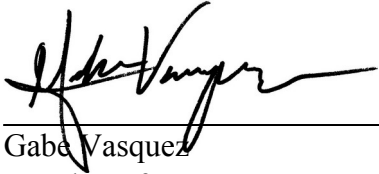
Melanie Stansbury
Member of Congress

⁵ Gucinski, H, et al (eds.). (2001). Forest Roads: A Synthesis of Scientific Information. General Technical Report PNW-GTR-509. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station.

⁶ Liu, N, et al (2022). Quantifying the Role of National Forest System and Other Forested Lands in Providing Surface Drinking Water Supply for the Conterminous United States. General Technical Report WO-100. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Southern Research Station.

⁷ Gucinski, H. et al (eds), *supra* note 5.

⁸ Healey, SP, *supra* note 4.



Gabe Vasquez
Member of Congress

CC: Brad Kinder, Acting Director, Ecosystem Management Coordination