

By The Denver Post Editorial Board
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After three decades of legal and political bickering, 4.1 million acres of roadless national forest lands in Colorado - and the wildlife they shelter - will soon have permanent protection against inappropriate development.

About a third of the national forest land in the lower 48 states is roadless. In the 1970s, the U.S. Forest Service launched its first "Roadless Area Review and Evaluation" (RARE) studies to catalogue which portions of those lands would be suitable for wilderness designation. In 1979, a second, more comprehensive study, RARE II, identified more than 59 million roadless acres nationwide. The total included 6.5 million acres in Colorado, of which 1.4 million acres were then or later designated as wilderness. The question then became what protection would be extended to the remaining roadless areas, primarily located in the northern and central Rockies and the San Juan Mountains.

After 22 years of bickering between environmental groups and development interests, the Clinton administration issued a rule in its final days in office in 2001 protecting the remaining roadless areas, which by then totaled 4.4 million acres in Colorado. That order was overturned by the incoming Bush administration, which in 2005 directed individual states to develop roadless plans for federal review. Gov. Bill Owens responded by crafting a bipartisan task force which turned in a generally sound set of recommendations - only to see them put on hold in February when a federal judge in California tossed out the Bush plan inviting state input and reinstating the Clinton protections. That ruling, in turn, was later overturned by another federal court, but not until Owens had been succeeded by Democratic Gov. Bill Ritter.

Rather than prolong this sorry legal odyssey, Ritter wisely kept most of the bipartisan panel's recommendations, including giving more latitude for wildfire mitigations and critical watersheds, allowing grazing to continue and allowing several existing mines in the North Fork valley to expand.

Ritter did add several significant points, including assurance that the roadless areas would be protected against development while the remaining rule-making saga plays out. Because some of the 4.4 million acres designated by Clinton have since acquired roads or been designated as wilderness, the final rules will protect about 4.1 million acres.

Last week, a federal advisory panel endorsed Ritter's recommendations and sent them to Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns. If Johanns accepts the petition, the state and Forest Service will then write the final rules protecting the roadless areas, a process expected to take about 18 months.

Protection for these precious parts of Colorado has been a long time coming. But it's undoubtedly a case of better late than never.

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