

April 13, 2006

USDA Forest Service
SRS Comments, Lands 4S
1400 Independence Ave., SW, Mailstop 1124
Washington, DC, 20250-0003.
SRS_Land_Sales@fs.fed.us

RE: Proposal to Sell Public Forest Service Land to Fund Federal Obligations Under the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act

US Forest Service Land Sales Official:

I write today on behalf of the Access Fund and the American climbing community in opposition to the US Forest Service proposal to sell off public land to fund federal obligations under the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act (SDA). On behalf of the American climbing community The Access Fund urges the US Forest Service (USFS) to reconsider this ill-advised funding mechanism for the SDA and in particular to remove any recreational rock climbing parcels from the auction list before submission to Congress.

The Access Fund

The Access Fund is a 501(c) 3 non-profit advocacy and conservation organization representing the interests of American rock and mountain climbers. The Access Fund is the nation's largest climber organization with over 15,000 members and affiliates. We advocate on behalf of approximately one million technical rock climbers and mountaineers nation-wide. Many of our members recreate on public US Forest Service land across the country including parcels recently identified as potentially eligible for sale. Our individual members will be writing you to urge removal of these specific parcels from the auction list.

The Access Fund's mission is to keep climbing areas open, and to conserve the climbing environment. Preserving the opportunity to climb and the diversity of the climbing experience are fundamental to our mission. The Access Fund encourages an ethic of personal responsibility, self-regulation, and Leave No Trace practices among climbers; works closely with local climbers, land managers, environmental organizations, and other interest

groups to manage and preserve climbing areas throughout the United States; develops and distributes climber education materials; acquires and manages land; and provides funding for conservation and impact-mitigation projects, and for scientific research relevant to the climbing environment. Find out more about us at www.accessfund.org.

The Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act

The bi-partisan Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act (SDA) was passed in 2000 to stabilize the level of federal payments to approximately 700 counties nationwide that historically depended on timber revenues from adjacent national forest lands. The law guarantees payments to eligible rural counties for public education and transportation projects. The US Forest Service now proposes to pay for another five-year authorization of the law by selling \$800 million-worth of National Forest land, resulting in largest sale of federal public land in decades.

The Proposed Land Sale Fails to Fully Fund Federal Obligations to Counties and Deprives the Public of Valuable Recreational Resources

The administration's 2007 budget plan seeks to raise money from public land sales to pay for schools and roads, and hopes to eventually eliminate their obligation required under the SDA (the new plan would eliminate funding by 2011). However, many counties would rather not trade existing and popular recreation areas (that also provide economic benefits) for a temporary funding system for the SDA. While some small obscure US Forest Service parcels (that are a burden to the agency and adjacent land owners alike) may be appropriate for sale, many public climbing areas could be at risk of private purchase under this proposed system, forever restricting climbing access or otherwise impairing these environments. Many people, including various US Senators, have noted that the US Forest Service rushed its compilation of the auction list, and as a result the public could lose lands they value without ever knowing they were for sale.

Bipartisan Political Opposition

Congress is overwhelmingly against this new plan—both Republicans and Democrats alike worry that the proposal would sell off valued public lands only fund the rural schools and infrastructure program at 50% of current levels for just five years, and then end the county payments program altogether. The proposal would also pit states against each other, forcing competition for benefits. Last year, the west coast states of Oregon, California and Washington claimed more than two-thirds of the \$393 million the program provided to schools, roads and other services in those counties. Under the new proposal, Oregon alone would get \$162 million in exchange for 10,581 acres. Washington would get \$46.9 million in exchange for 7,516 acres. Many feel that the amount of acres to be

sold in each state is not fairly proportionate to the value to be received and individual legislators across the country have spoken out against this disparity.

Unfair Disparity of Benefits and Burden

Although the plan would give the majority of benefits to states that suffered the most by federal policies that restricted logging in the 1990s (a few western states are well over 50% federally-owned, yet saw a 95 % timber harvest reduction in their local forests), the regional disparity in state benefits under this proposal are unfair and divisive, and there is no guarantee that money generated by the sales would stay within the states where the land will be sold. Most of the lands proposed to be sold are in states that get little of the money, and very little land is proposed to be sold in the states that get the most money. Even the winners are losers under this proposal:

- Only about 10 percent of the proceeds would go toward rural schools in the South and Midwest, the two regions where more than a third of the sales of 300,000-plus acres would occur.
- California would receive \$69 million for selling about 80,000 acres.
- In Idaho, 26,194 acres of public National Forest land have been targeted for the sale, including more than 5,000 acres in the Sawtooth National Forest.
- In Colorado, more than 21,000 acres in 11 national forests and grasslands are listed as potential auction candidates, including areas that are currently popular public recreation areas.
- 21,566 acres in Missouri's Mark Twain National Forest would be sold, with proceeds going to a general fund. Missouri's share of the school-funding is among the lowest at \$2.7 million.
- In Wyoming, 17,619 acres are potentially for sale in the Black Hills, Medicine Bow and Bridger-Teton National Forests and the Thunder Basin National Grassland.
- In North Carolina, the Forest Service has proposed selling nearly 10,000 acres, returning disproportionately little financial benefit back to the state.
- New Mexico would get \$2.3 million, just one-fifth of 1 percent of the overall proceeds, in exchange for selling 8,000 acres, or 2 percent of the sales.
- 4,600 acres in South Carolina would be for sale along with 2,700 acres in Nevada with little financial benefits returned to those states.
- 870 acres of Indian's Hoosier National Forest are listed for auction, yet Indiana would get nearly nothing in return.

Additional Problems Related to the Proposed Sale of US Forest Service Lands

Although the US Forest Service defends this controversial proposal by stating that they are only considering selling isolated parcels that no longer meet National Forest System needs. Nonetheless, lands are included on the auction list that previously were proposed as wilderness areas in California. Moreover, popular recreation areas in Colorado are eligible for sale, apparently ignoring the health benefits for those that recreate there as well as economic benefits to the community where recreationists frequent and spend money. Also consider the following:

- The land sales would set a dangerous precedent by relying on the permanent sale of public resources to fund local schools and road projects. This proposal will lead to choosing our valued local natural resources to pay for education needs that may be several states away. Special places in one state may be sold to pay for school kids across the country.
- These public land sales could undermine important conservation efforts to preserve unique landscapes such as those near Rocky Mountain National Park outside of Estes Park, Colorado. The USFS has long attempted to consolidate open space by obtaining easements and restraining development and the US Forest Service often land trades for such conservation purposes. However, this new plan could derail many of these longstanding conservation efforts.
- Short-term gains would be offset by the permanent loss of public lands, and profits from the proposed sales would fall far short of what's needed to help rural governments pay for schools and other basic services.

Conclusion

County payments are an extremely important funding source for counties with Forest Service land inside their boundaries, but it is irresponsible to sell off public lands—that we will lose forever—in exchange for a program we can pay for by other more prudent means. Climbers, bikers, boaters, hunters, anglers, campers and other recreational users benefit from and depend on access to public lands. Selling public lands to pay down the deficit would be a shortsighted and ill-advised shift in federal land-management policy.

The Access Fund has alerted over 15,000 of its members, regional coordinators and affiliate organizations regarding the problems of this proposal in general as well as the fact that specific local climbing resources may be at risk. Many of these local climbing advocates will be writing the US Forest Service to urge you to take their specific

climbing areas off the auction list. Please protect these valuable local climbing areas by removing their eligibility from the land sale proposal.

Sincerely,

Jason Keith
Policy Director
The Access Fund

Cc: US Senator Larry Craig
US Senator Ron Wyden
US Representative Greg Walden
US Representative Tom Udall
Steve Matous, Access Fund Executive Director