

WESTERN RESOURCES WRAPUP

Wilderness Under Review

By HELENE C. MONBERG
Special to The Denver Post

WASHINGTON — Concerned that wilderness legislation soon will come "in a kind of porkbarrel mold," as the Forest Service's Zane G. Smith puts it, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) is reviewing its roadless and undeveloped areas — about 7,500 of them.

"We are concerned about having two or three wilderness bills before Congress each year in a kind of porkbarrel mold," said Smith, who is project director of the USFS roadless areas review. "That is a fragmentary approach to wilderness; it does not provide for the more comprehensive look at wilderness which we feel is necessary for proper forest management.

"AFTER WE IDENTIFIED 56 million acres of roadless areas in 1973, we found that we were becoming embroiled in all kinds of debate in our planning process. It was beginning to slow up and stop our local management program. For example, there has been a

lot of controversy over what to do about the roadless area known as Gospel Hump in Idaho along the Salmon River, and we could not move ahead until we could get some political decisions.

"We took our problem to Dr. (M. R.) Cutler (the assistant agriculture secretary with jurisdiction over the Forest Service). He agreed with us that we should speed up our roadless review and make an inventory of the roadless areas to determine the ones that should be in wilderness, the ones that should be out, and those which should be studied further," Smith said.

USFS officials expect the review process will take about 18 months. It announced June 14 that 204 workshops throughout the West and elsewhere would be from July 11 through Aug. 18. Emphasized will be local comments, particularly from residents near roadless areas in Idaho, Montana, Washington, Oregon, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, California and Alaska, where most of the roadless areas are.

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have details. Some local hearings also will be held in the Midwest and East to determine how many roadless areas in the National Grasslands and in the East should be included in the National Wilderness System. Neither group of lands was included in the 1973 USFS roadless area inventory, which also overlooked some roadless areas in the West, according to USFS officials.

"There is an urgent need to resolve the question of how much National Forest land and National Grasslands should be given wilderness designation, and how much should be available for other resource management," the USFS work plan for updating the roadless area inventory said.

The final decision must be made by Congress "on whether we have in the National Forest System 30 million, 40 million, 60 million or 80 million acres of wilderness," Smith said.

CURRENTLY, 14.4 MILLION acres of federal land are in the National Wilderness System; of which more than 87 per cent is in the National Forest System. The system comprises 187,639,754 acres at this time, including 3,808,500 acres in the National Grasslands, according to the latest USFS figures.

But the problem is more complex than just how much wilderness to have, according to Smith.

"We want to look at the lands from a national perspective to determine if the system is balanced; we want to look at these roadless areas in light of our goals under the Resources Planning Act of 1974, under suitable criteria for all areas, using our ongoing land-management planning process as much as possible," Smith said.

IN ADDITION TO THE local workshops announced June 16, the Forest Service will accept written comments from the public on areas recommended for wilderness or nonwilderness status through local Forest Service offices up to Sept. 15.

If an environmental impact statement is needed, work on it will begin after these comments have been received "so that we can look at the alternatives, the trade-offs and the costs, including to the consumer," Smith said.

56 THE DENVER POST Thurs., July 7, 1977