

UTAH

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Business / B10

READERS SUGGEST STREET NAMES

Honoring famous Utahns / B2

For the Record B2 ♦ Review B6 ♦ Obituaries B6

Forest plan gains detractors

Environmental groups unhappy with state agency's roadless petition process, calling it secretive and a sham

By JOE BAIRD
The Salt Lake Tribune

Utah's roadless-forest petition process is coming under increasing fire from environmental groups.

With the November deadline for the state to submit its roadless petition to the Forest Service approaching,

conservationists say decisions made by the governor's Public Lands Policy Coordination Office to work primarily with the counties in identifying Utah's forest priorities has deprived them and others of having any meaningful dialogue on the issue.

"Once the state decided to go ahead with a roadless petition, there should have been a decision for an open

and transparent process," said Kevin Mueller, executive director of the Utah Environmental Congress, a forest watchdog group. "Instead, they have chosen to keep this quiet and under the table."

Lynn Stevens, director of Public Lands Policy office, says coordinating with the Forest Service's ongoing planning process is the primary reason for working directly with the counties, which already have a place at the Forest Service's planning table as cooperating agencies.

Stevens also believes the Forest Service planning process provides the public with ample opportunity to
See **COMPLAINTS**, B4

Complaints dog plan for roadless forest

● Continued from B1

comment but says his office will accept input from the public.

"What we would like, rather than public hearings — which the Forest Service will do — is to hear from elements of the public that have concerns about the petition, to contact our office and bring their concerns to us," Stevens said. "They will be heard. They won't be ignored."

State roadless petitions grew out of last year's decision by the Bush administration to repeal the Clinton-era roadless forest rule, which had been enacted to preserve America's last stands of undeveloped forestland. Out of Utah's 8 million acres of Forest Service land, about half has been

identified as roadless.

Supporters of the Bush policy say repealing the roadless rule will lead to better, more active management of the forests.

At least four states — Washington, Oregon, California and New Mexico — have challenged the Bush policy in court, seeking a return to the Clinton-era protections. Critics have accused the administration of selling out to logging and energy interests.

Those states participating in the process have focused primarily on targeting roadless areas they want to remain protected and are doing so through studies, working groups and public meetings.

But in Utah, the primary focus has been to identify areas of the forest that county officials wish to remain open for possible economic development or motorized recreation.

"We've been talking to the Forest Service and other [adjoining] counties about how to prioritize those roads that are important, as well as some of the [roadless] areas the Forest

Service wants to maintain as backcountry and ensure we don't have concerns," Sevier County Commissioner Ralph Okerlund said this week.

But environmentalists question the ability of the counties to make recommendations that could affect critical watershed and wildlife habitat that roadless areas currently protect.

"If you go to Kane County and want to talk to their biologist or archaeologist, who is that?" asked Jim Catlin, coordinator of the Wild Utah Project. "If you want to talk to their recreation director, it's probably the guy in charge of the [off-highway vehicle] program. Most of these counties have not invested in the resources that would allow them to make these multiple-use type of decisions."

For those and other reasons, Mueller, the Utah Environmental Congress director, says his organization will pass on the state's petition process altogether.

"The Bush policy is about allowing states to provide

direction for the management of the roadless areas, and the management direction provided by the governor's office is likely to allow for new roads, logging and energy development in these areas," Mueller said. "It's not about protecting the forest. "We absolutely will not participate, and it's a mistake for any environmental group to participate if they have an interest in protecting our roadless forests and the national status of these lands. The whole thing is a sham."

But Stevens maintains that all parties will get a fair shake.

"We want to find the best possible balance in terms of what's best for the forest and what's best for the public," he said.

The counties have been given an early May deadline to submit their roadless-petition recommendations to the state, though Stevens said it could be extended.

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