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FROM: Virginia Wilderness Committee

Rollback of federal rule threatens Virginia waters, wildlife, nature, and recreation

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U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Secretary Brooke Rollins announced yesterday that, despite strong public opposition, the U.S. Forest Service plans to rescind the long-standing Roadless Rule, which has protected more than 45 million acres of undeveloped national forest lands for 25 years.

The agency characterized the rollback as a wildfire-prevention measure, even though the Roadless Rule already allows fuel reduction, small tree thinning, and other wildfire-prevention management work. In Appalachia, more than 80 percent of wildfires are human caused; nationwide, 90 percent of wildfire ignitions occur within half a mile of roads. From 1992 to 2024, wildfires were four times as likely to start in roaded areas than in roadless forest tracts. Given that evidence, the claim that building more roads in forests would reduce wildfire risk is misleading–so much so that wildland firefighters across the country have opposed repealing the Roadless Rule.

In Virginia, the repeal would affect 84 percent of the roughly 394,000 acres on the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests currently protected by the Roadless Rule– the largest share of any Eastern state.

Since 2001, roadless areas in Virginia and across the country have been recognized as some of the last wild national forest lands not already protected as congressionally designated Wilderness. By remaining closed to roadbuilding, mining, commercial logging and other development allowed elsewhere in national forests, these areas help protect drinking water, provide essential habitat for wildlife and native plants, and support sustainable economic benefits for rural communities.

Statement from the Virginia Wilderness Committee's Executive Director Ellen Stuart-Haentjens:

"These landscapes quietly perform some of the most important environmental services

Virginians rely on every day – most importantly, they provide clean drinking water. The clear mountain streams that rise in our roadless areas flow into the James, Potomac, and Shenandoah rivers that help sustain communities and our natural heritage all the way to the Chesapeake Bay."

"If we cut roads into these areas and allow for mining, commercial logging and other development, we trade long-term clean water security for short-term extraction. Not a good deal for Virginians."

"Generations of hunters, hikers, anglers, birders and other outdoor enthusiasts have treasured roadless areas for their beauty, healthy forests, and ample wildlife. These places are on public land and belong to all of us; we cannot allow them to be offered up to the highest bidder who would squander our children's future enjoyment of some of nature's finest wild places."

Fast Facts

The Roadless Area Conservation Rule passed in 2001, following years of scientific study, policy debate, and public review that included 1.6 million public comments, the most ever at the time, with the vast majority in favor of the rule.

National forest Roadless Areas in Virginia:

- Comprise about 22% of the total 1.8 million acres of the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests combined
- 75% contain native brook trout watersheds
- Safeguard nearly 545 miles of rivers
- Harbor 43 at-risk species
- One quarter of the Appalachian Trail runs through Virginia, much of it through roadless areas when on the national forest

Nationally:

- Roadless areas encompass 354 municipal watersheds that provide clean water for 60 million Americans in 3,400 communities

- Provide world-class outdoor recreational opportunities on 43,000 miles of trails for hikers, mountain bikers, climbers, birders, horseback riders, backpackers, hunters, anglers, and backcountry skiers
- Generate a significant portion of the outdoor recreation industry's $730 billion in annual revenue and 6.5 million jobs
- Provide habitat for more than 1,600 threatened or endangered plant and animal species

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Organized in 1969, the Virginia Wilderness Committee (VWC) works to permanently protect the best of Virginia's wild places for future generations, foster understanding and appreciation of Wilderness, and promote enjoyment and stewardship of our last remaining wildlands. The Virginia Wilderness Committee is a 501(C)3 non-profit citizens' group.