

NINA MOINI: And you're listening to Minnesota Now. Thanks so much for joining us. I'm Nina Moini. The Trump administration has taken a step toward opening tens of millions of acres of forest nationwide to roads, logging, and other development that includes 62,000 acres in Northern Minnesota. That land is protected under what's called the Roadless Rule, created by the Clinton administration in 2001.

In a statement last week, US Department of Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins called the rule outdated. She said repealing it will help local forest managers control wildfires. Supporters of this move also say allowing logging and other development in these areas will boost rural economies. But environmental groups say it'll jeopardize public lands that people treasure. Joining me to help us understand these areas is forest ecologist Lee Frelich, who's based at the University of Minnesota. Thanks so much for coming back on the program and sharing your time with us, Lee.

LEE FRELICH: Yeah. Nice to be with you.

NINA MOINI: So the areas we're talking about are designated roadless, they're not wilderness areas or national parks. Could you just give us a brief rundown of why the Federal government decided to protect them in this way, with this rule?

LEE FRELICH: Well, yeah. An inventory was done over 20 years ago and found that there are these lands that essentially have the character of wilderness. They're in remote locations. They don't have roads in good natural condition. And so they were identified as roadless areas under this rule because they hadn't been included in the Wilderness Act itself. So they're in between wilderness areas and regular national forest land.

NINA MOINI: And can you describe them a little bit more? What makes them special in terms of trees, maybe species found there, or is it that they're just untouched?

LEE FRELICH: Yeah, I mean, they're more pristine ecologically. They have healthy watersheds. They're good wildlife habitat. They harbor rare species. A lot of times, they're also near the edge of large wilderness areas, like in the case of Minnesota, the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.

And they provide more space, in essence, for large disturbances like the big windstorms and the big fires that we've had more space for those big natural events to play themselves out on the landscape. And there are also a baseline for the managed forest. So if you compare areas that aren't being harvested, the areas that over time, you can tell what kind of impacts the harvesting is having.

NINA MOINI: And so with that in mind, obviously there's been so much suffering with the wildfires that have been happening in the Northeastern part of the state and in Canada as well. And the USDA and the Forest Service-- like I alluded to in our introduction-- say that repealing this rule will help forest managers prevent fires from becoming too severe. Arguing, I guess, for more local control over how this type of land would be used. What do you think about that argument?

LEE FRELICH: Well, it might make sense in a few areas in the Western US. I'm not sure that it applies to Minnesota very much. If anything, these roadless areas, which are mostly right on the edge of the Boundary Waters, provide more of a buffer zone in case any big fires start in the wilderness and burn toward the edge of it. So also, forest managers can do prescribed burns in certain limited management actions to prevent future fires in some of these roadless areas, and that has been done in some of them. So it's not exactly the best argument that I've heard.

NINA MOINI: OK. So we talked a little bit about prevention and use of that area. The proposal also would allow for roads, things like logging, other perhaps industries or uses for the area that could lead to financial gain of some way. And it doesn't guarantee that would happen. But how likely do you think that it is that these areas of Minnesota in particular, would see that type of development if this roadless rule were repealed?

LEE FRELICH: Well, there's a limited possibility. I mean, these aren't exactly places that are easy to get to. I mean, I suppose they could build more forest roads, but the Forest Service already has a problem maintaining the roads that they already have. It's expensive to build and maintain roads in very remote wild areas like this. And also having more roads means more fire ignitions because most ignitions are human ignitions and they occur within a short distance of roads. So there, again, I don't buy their arguments.

NINA MOINI: You did mention the Western part of the United States. Is that an area where you feel these types of protections or ending them would have a bigger impact? Or where would be mostly impacted, do you think?

LEE FRELICH: Well, yeah. The acreage in the West are much bigger. Some of them have much more valuable timber, for example, the Tongass National Forest-- which has ancient rainforests where the trees are much more valuable and it might actually be economically worthwhile to extract those trees. Although I'm sure there are many reasons not to do that as well, because we don't have a lot of protected ancient rainforests either.

And the rest of the Western United States does have a lot of areas that used to be more open, and they filled in with denser trees, which leads to more intense wildfires. So it's kind of a different situation in those areas than it is in Minnesota.

NINA MOINI: OK. The announcement from the USDA came down the same day that Governor Tim Walz made an executive order, banning mining from the watershed surrounding the Boundary Waters Wilderness area. Do you know how close the roadless areas-- you mentioned they are bordering boundary waters types of areas in our state. But generally, the roadless areas, how do they interact with the focus of the mining debate?

LEE FRELICH: Well, not a lot because the bulk of the roadless areas are to the East of the area where the proposed mines would take place. So they're a little bit more toward the southeastern edge of the Boundary Waters Wilderness, whereas the proposed mining areas are closer to Ely. So there isn't a lot of overlap there. And then there's a few roadless areas on the Echo Trail and one on the Fernberg Trail, which are quite small. And again, those are some distance-- 10 or 20 miles or even more away from the mining area.

NINA MOINI: OK, that's good to. Thanks for breaking that down. Just lastly, there's a public comment period open until, I guess, mid-September. How much does public comment tend to factor into Forest Service decisions like this?

LEE FRELICH: Well, public comments are really important. It's important for a lot of people to make comments. They really do take them into account. And in this particular case, polling really shows that having large roadless areas and intact wilderness areas in the United States is actually very popular. I mean, it's in the 70s and 80% support category in polls, and so people should make comments. Last time, there was a comment period, they got 1.6 million comments and the vast majority were in favor of maintaining the roadless areas.

NINA MOINI: OK, Lee. Thank you so much. Yep, I'm seeing a 2019 Pew survey that found 75% of people supported keeping the protections. Thanks, as always, for your time and helping us make sense of all of this, Lee. We appreciate it.

LEE FRELICH: Yep, you're welcome.

NINA MOINI: Lee Freilich directs the Center for Forest Ecology at the University of Minnesota.