

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

September 24, 2026

The Honorable Brooke Rollins  
Secretary of Agriculture  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue SW  
Washington, D.C. 20250

## **RE: Proposed Rescission of the Roadless Area Conservation Rule**

Dear Secretary Rollins:

As Members of Congress representing the Commonwealth of Virginia, we write in strong opposition to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's proposal to rescind the Roadless Area Conservation Rule (the "Roadless Rule"). Since its implementation in 2001, the Roadless Rule has protected 45 million acres of America's national forest lands, including nearly 394,000 acres in Virginia. This proposal would strip protections from approximately 84% of Virginia's roadless areas, opening these lands to road construction, logging, and other industrial activities. The consequences for Virginia's environment, economy, and public health would be severe, falling squarely on the families and communities we represent.

### **Jeopardizing Virginia's Drinking Water and Ecosystems**

With more roadless acres than any other state east of the Mississippi River, Virginia has an outsized stake in decisions regarding the Roadless Rule.<sup>1</sup> These lands span the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests, providing headwaters for major river systems, including the Potomac, James, and Roanoke watersheds. The James and Potomac Rivers flow directly into the Chesapeake Bay, one of the most ecologically significant estuaries on the Atlantic Coast. More than 2.5 million Virginians in communities across the state, from the Shenandoah Valley to Northern Virginia, Richmond, and Hampton Roads, rely on these downstream waters for at least part of their drinking supply. Expanding road construction would introduce sediment and pollutants into these waterways, degrading water quality for Virginia households.

Roadless areas are also critical to Virginia's biodiversity, containing habitat for 43 at-risk species, including bats, pollinators, freshwater mussels, and rare plants.<sup>2</sup> Virginia is also home to some of the largest remaining populations of brook trout in the southeast, a species that depends on cold, clean, and undisturbed streams. They also provide the clean, cold water that native brook trout require, and Virginia is reported to have the largest populations of brook trout south of the Mason-Dixon line.<sup>3</sup> Road construction fragments habitat and often enables invasive species to spread into

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<sup>1</sup> Southern Environmental Law Center, *Virginia and the Roadless Rule*, March 10, 2026.

<sup>2</sup> Defenders of Wildlife, Interactive map: At-Risk Species in National Forest Roadless Areas, available at <https://www.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/b6ed7f5059d44ee7b161dc0c23041e0d> (zoom to Virginia) (last accessed April 1, 2026).

<sup>3</sup> Southern Environmental Law Center, *Virginia and the Roadless Rule*, January 9, 2025; see also Trout Unlimited, *Roadless- America's Sporting Lands*, available at [TU-ROADLESS-REPORT-FINAL\\_E\\_COPY.pdf](#).

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backcountry forests, driving species decline. Once lost, these ecosystems and the countless benefits they provide to clean air, clean water, and climate resilience cannot be easily restored, if at all.

## **Threatening a Proven Economic Engine**

Virginia's national forests are world-class recreation destinations, renowned for their hiking, mountain biking, hunting, and birding opportunities. They are also a cornerstone of the state's large and growing outdoor recreation economy, which generated over \$14.4 billion in 2024.<sup>4</sup> In 2019, Virginia's national forests contributed \$77.2 million to local economies, with recreation contributing far more than any other program and nearly triple the combined contribution of forest products, minerals, and energy (\$13 million).<sup>5</sup> Roadless areas are also critical to backcountry hunting and angling in Virginia, which generate a combined \$4.6 billion in annual economic impact for the state.<sup>6</sup> These are real, durable, economic benefits that sustain local communities, especially in rural areas, year after year. They depend directly on the benefits that roadless areas protect: healthy ecosystems, abundant wildlife, and high-quality recreational trails.

Opening Virginia's backcountry to road construction and industrial extraction would degrade the very resources that drive this economic activity, hurting rural communities first and foremost. Trading a sustained multibillion-dollar economic engine for industry extraction and degradation would be fiscally irresponsible, sacrificing the long-term viability of Virginia's communities and local businesses for outside interests' short-term profit gains.

## **Increasing Wildfire Risk and Straining Public Resources**

Expanding road networks into backcountry forests would significantly undermine public safety. The Roadless Rule is fire smart, protecting against the two biggest risk factors for wildfire: ignitions and fuels. U.S. Forest Service data show that most unplanned wildfires in national forests start within 50 yards of a road,<sup>7</sup> with nearly 90% of wildfires nationwide being human caused.<sup>8</sup>

By opening previously undisturbed areas to new roads and increased human activity, rescinding the Roadless Rule would create significantly more opportunities for wildfire ignitions.

Importantly, the Roadless Rule already provides the targeted flexibility needed for fire management, allowing road construction and vegetation removal where necessary to lower fuel loads and wildfire risk, as well as to fight wildfire in urgent situations.

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<sup>4</sup> US Bureau of Economic Analysis, *Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2024*, available at <https://www.bea.gov/news/2026/outdoor-recreation-economic-statistics-us-and-states-2024>, accessed April 2, 2026 (see state level table [ores0326-state.xlsx](#)).

<sup>5</sup> USFS, Forest Level Economic Contributions Dashboard-2019, available at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/about-agency/policy/analysis/economic-contributions-dashboard> (select George Washington and Jefferson National Forest) (last accessed April 1, 2026).

<sup>6</sup> Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources, *Annual Report 2025*, accessed March 30, 2026, <https://dwr.virginia.gov/about/annual-report/>

<sup>7</sup> Rom, Z, "USDA Says It Needs Roads to Fight Remote Wildfires, but a New Study Says Roads Bring More Fire to Forests," *Inside Climate News*, March 24, 2026, <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/24032026/usda-roadless-rule-forest-wildfires/>

<sup>8</sup> Congressional Research Service, "Wildfire Statistics," June 2023, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/IF10244.pdf>

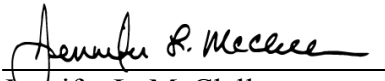
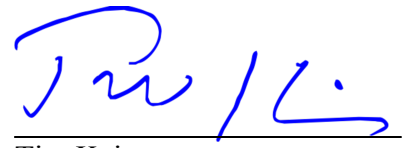
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In short, there is no operational need to rescind the rule to address wildfire risk. Instead, this proposal would expand an already overextended system; the U.S. Forest Service faces a \$9 billion backlog in maintaining existing roads, many of which are already impassable, posing safety risks, or degrading water quality.<sup>9</sup> Building new roads into backcountry forests would divert limited infrastructure resources while increasing ignition risk and placing additional strain on wildfire response capacity.

For 25 years, the Roadless Rule has demonstrated that protecting America's national forest lands is both effective and widely supported. During the initial comment period on this proposal, more than 600,000 public comments were submitted, with an estimated 99% opposing rescission.<sup>10</sup> Recent national polling similarly shows broad bipartisan support: more than three quarters of likely voters support maintaining these protections and prioritizing conservation over development.<sup>11</sup> Rescinding the Roadless Rule would ignore this overwhelming public consensus while undermining Virginia's drinking water, biodiversity, local economies, and public safety. We urge the Department to withdraw this dangerous proposal and maintain the Roadless Area Conservation Rule of 2001 in its entirety.

Sincerely,

  
Jennifer L. McClellan  
Member of Congress  
Tim Kaine  
United States Senator  
Subhas Subramanyam  
Member of Congress  
Eugene Simon Vindman  
Member of Congress  
Mark R. Warner  
United States Senator  
Donald S. Beyer Jr.  
Member of Congress

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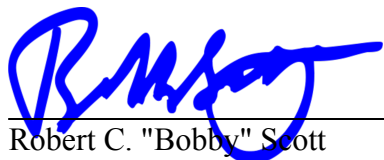
<sup>9</sup> Defenders of Wildlife and WildEarth Guardians, *Technical White-Paper- Deferred Maintenance for the National Forest Road System*, [Deferred maintenance of the National Forest Road System report.pdf - Google Drive](#)

<sup>10</sup> Southern Environmental Law Center, "SELC Celebrates 25th Anniversary of Roadless Rule with Sen. Tim Kaine, Rep. Jennifer McClellan, and Conservation Partners," January 13, 2026, <https://www.selc.org/press-release/selc-celebrates-25th-anniversary-of-roadless-rule-with-sen-tim-kaine-rep-jennifer-mcclellan-and-conservation-partner>

<sup>11</sup> Pew Charitable Trusts, "An Update on the Roadless Rule," February 18, 2026, <https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2026/02/18/an-update-on-the-roadless-rule>

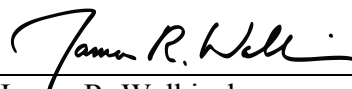
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Robert C. "Bobby" Scott  
Member of Congress



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James R. Walkinshaw  
Member of Congress