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Thousands of miles of trouble

LES BLUMENTHAL; The News Tribune

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WASHINGTON – Some 20 years ago, when gear jammers were high balling out of the Cascades with loads of old-growth timber and jake-breaking around curves, the U.S. Forest Service built 22,000 miles of logging roads in Washington state.

Along with salmon, orcas, Lewis and Clark, and Mount St. Helens, those roads are part of the lore of the Northwest and a reminder of a way of life that has mostly disappeared. But that legacy of timber country is now creating problems.

With the timber harvest on federal lands a trickle of what it was during the peak of the late 1980s, Washington state officials say the logging roads are deteriorating because of Forest Service neglect. And those deteriorating roads threaten to undo efforts to restore salmon runs, particularly in the rivers and streams flowing into Puget Sound.

The state has asked Congress to provide \$300 million over the next 10 years to maintain or remove the Forest Service roads. And though lawmakers are sympathetic, the federal budget is tight.

Even so, as Rep. Norm Dicks, D-Belfair, said at a recent hearing, “If we do not fix our roads, we will have to drink our roads – after they slide into our streams.”

Nationwide, there are roughly 380,000 miles of roads in the national forests. The Forest Service estimates there is a \$4 billion maintenance backlog on the roads. At the same time, Dicks said, the Bush administration has proposed a 31 percent cut in the Forest Service’s road maintenance budget.

The roads were built and maintained using money generated by timber sales. But as logging has declined, so has available funding.

Prior to the protection of the northern spotted owl and other threatened and endangered species in the region’s old-growth forests, nearly 6 billion board-feet of timber was logged annually in Washington and Oregon. Today, less than half a billion board-feet is cut, though the Bush administration would like to see that level doubled.

MANY ROADS NEAR WATERSHEDS

State officials say the roads, especially in the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie and Olympic national forests, are falling apart. They’re creating erosion and runoff that is smothering salmon spawning habitat with sediment and raising water temperatures above levels the fish can tolerate.

“It’s a road system built for resource extraction that is no longer needed,” said Steve Bernath, a senior policy analyst with the state Department of Ecology. “If you don’t maintain them, this will be only a growing problem over the years.”

Bernath said the problem was especially acute because many of the roads were at the top of important salmon watersheds along Puget Sound. Their deterioration, along with blocked and broken culverts, already has caused problems downstream.

About two-thirds of the roads in the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie and Olympic forests need work, Bernath estimated. He said the Forest Service is spending only about \$3 million a year on road maintenance in the state, while the backlog of deferred maintenance grows by \$8 million a year.

“They are only going to fund 15,000 miles of road maintenance nationwide, and we have 22,000 miles of roads in Washington state alone,” he said.

MISSING THE DEADLINE

In 2000, the Forest Service signed an agreement with the state that required it to close roads or fix them by 2015. Five years later, the Forest Service admitted it couldn’t make that deadline.

“We were concerned all along they might not be able to meet the deadline, but everyone was surprised at how big the problem was,” Bernath said.

The state, along with private landowners, has a 2016 deadline to fix its roads.

Forest Service officials in the region acknowledge the problem. They say they are tracking it and developing annual work plans.

“There is always more work than you have the funds to do,” said Richard Sowa, the Forest Service’s regional engineer in Portland. “But it is a reality of life. We have a larger road system than we can afford.”

A TIGHT BUDGET

On Capitol Hill, lawmakers say they have talked with state officials and will do what they can. But they caution that the budget environment is difficult.

“These things need to be done, but the current budget doesn’t allow for a great big fix all at once,” Dicks said in an interview. “There isn’t that type of money around.”

Dicks is chairman of the House interior appropriations subcommittee, which has jurisdiction over the Forest Service budget. His subcommittee will write its spending bill in the next several weeks.

On the Senate side, an aide to Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., said her boss would work with Dicks to find money for Forest Service road maintenance.

Washington’s other senator, Democrat Maria Cantwell, said the problems in the state reflect a broader national problem.

“The administration needs to come up with a real plan that prioritizes maintenance in the Forest Service budget to fix this,” Cantwell said in a statement. “It’s only common sense for the department to maintain forest access roads rather than attempting to build new ones.”

McClatchy reporter David Whitney contributed to this report. Les Blumenthal: 202-383-0008

lblumenthal@mcclatchydc.com

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253-597-8742



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