



# News Release

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## **Adequate funding can fix state's deteriorating national forest roads**

OLYMPIA – Abandoned and deteriorating roads in Washington's national forests are a huge, neglected problem due to prolonged underfunding by the federal government, say state government leaders, the treaty Indian tribes in western Washington, and 11 conservation groups.

The groups have joined forces to ask Congress to provide adequate funding to fix thousands of miles of crumbling roads that are degrading water quality, causing flooding and harming salmon habitat.

"The backlog of failing national forest roads in Washington grows daily," said Governor Chris Gregoire. "Congress has an opportunity, and an obligation, to act now and provide adequate funding. The longer we wait, the more expensive the cure for our ailing watersheds and salmon habitats on national forest lands."

Washington Department of Ecology (Ecology) Director Jay Manning added, "We are delivering a shared message to Congress – provide adequate funding to fix national forest roads and restore Washington's watersheds. Successfully implementing the initiative is critical to watershed health throughout the state, particularly Puget Sound where it will complement the Puget Sound Initiative."

Of the thousands of miles of national forest roads that need to be decommissioned or improved in Washington, two-thirds of the problem roads drain to Puget Sound, Manning said.

Billy Frank Jr., Chairman of the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission, said, "Puget Sound is in trouble, and we are working hard to protect it for future generations. If we are going to be successful in this effort, we absolutely must take care of the watersheds that feed the Sound."

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Director Jeff Koenings said, "Mud and runoff from failing roads directly impacts the rivers and streambeds our struggling salmon rely on for survival. These endangered fish face many habitat challenges. Addressing this one is not only critical for their recovery, but also readily correctable, especially in light of the millions of dollars currently being spent on salmon restoration."

Mike Anderson of The Wilderness Society added, "Old, neglected roads in the national forests are a serious threat to many rivers and streams that flow into Puget Sound. Spending more now to restore healthy watersheds will pay big dividends, not only for salmon, but for all of our communities that rely on clean water."

On April 19 representatives of this coalition will testify before Congressman Norm Dicks, and ask the Congressman's subcommittee to fund their proposed "Watershed Restoration

Initiative.” The initiative seeks to restore Washington’s watersheds harmed by the failing national forest roads.

Muddy runoff from the failing roads threatens Washington’s endangered and dwindling runs of salmon that need cold, clear water to thrive and reproduce. This muddy water harms fish gills and smothers fish eggs. Sediment that washes downstream degrades salmon habitat, and leads to wider, shallower and warmer streams.

Ecology, which is delegated to implement the federal Clean Water Act, has a long-term relationship with the USDA Forest Service (USFS) regarding water pollution from forest management practices. In an agreement Ecology and the USFS signed in 2000, national forests must meet Washington’s forest practice rules as a minimum standard. The agreement focuses on developing an inventory of USFS roads and meeting road maintenance obligations by 2016.

The USFS estimates that if road work begins today, it will take \$300 million to bring Washington’s national forests into compliance with today’s standards and meet its agreed deadline of 2016 with the state.

“If Congress designates \$30 million per year for the next decade, we can really fix this problem and the federal lands will catch up with the major private landowners who are going to meet the deadline,” Manning added.

Currently the federal budget provides the USFS with only \$3 million annually to address the problem. Such prolonged underfunding has created a maintenance backlog that grows by at least \$8 million each year, Manning said. The backlog does not include the cost to repair roads that fail because of neglect and does not account for inflation.

Washington’s storms in November 2006 showed that while private and state forests saw limited damage, poorly maintained USFS lands suffered more than \$30 million in road damage.

The agencies and conservation groups also say that climate change will further challenge the integrity of the USFS road network in Washington. A regional weather prediction model now predicts that although average rainfall will not change significantly, winter rainfall will increase and become more intense. The model also predicts a shift of the snow zone, which could contribute to flooding when heavy rain and warm temperatures occur during periods of snow accumulation.

In addition to the funding, Ecology, the Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife and the 11 conservation groups proposed the following steps to tackle the problem:

- Prioritize work to get the “biggest bang for the buck.”
- Use more field-based information to inventory, assess and develop projects.
- Provide adequate Forest Service staff to support project partnerships.
- Dedicate adequate monitoring funds to measure success.
- Strategically redeploy expert federal agency staff.

The 11 conservation groups are the Olympic Forest Coalition, Public Employees For Environmental Responsibility, Pacific Rivers Council, American Whitewater, The Wilderness Society, Cascade Chapter Sierra Club, Alpine Lakes Protection Society, North Cascades

Conservation Council, Pilchuck Audubon Society, The Mountaineers and Washington Wilderness Coalition.

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**Ecology's website:** <http://www.ecy.wa.gov>

**Link to additional background:**

[http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/nonpoint/forest\\_practices.html](http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/nonpoint/forest_practices.html)

**Broadcast version**

State leaders, treaty tribes in western Washington and 11 conservation groups say the federal government needs to act now to adequately fund deteriorating national forest roads in Washington to restore endangered salmon and Puget Sound.

The groups say that if road work begins today, it will cost \$30 million each year for the next decade to bring Washington's national forests into compliance with today's standards and meet an agreed deadline of 2016 with the state.

Gov. Chris Gregoire says the backlog of failing national forest roads in Washington grows daily and that the longer we wait, the more expensive the cure will be.