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February 26, 2006

Endangered lands

From almost any public-minded perspective, President Bush's plan to sell off up to 300,000 acres in the national forest system and 500,000 acres within the Bureau of Land Management is a mistake. From some vantage points, it looks like an outright scam.

Once this land falls into the hands of developers, it can never be reclaimed. And the Bush administration's excuse -- that it would use the money from the sale of forest land to temporarily fund a federal rural-school program -- doesn't hold water. The sale would produce enough revenue to make up a deficit from federal timber sales for six years. But the administration is phasing out the rural-school program, not saving it.

That fiscal reality undercuts the administration's position that the parcels proposed for sale amount to rag-ends, isolated and relatively useless to "meeting Forest Service needs," as Forest Service head (and former timber-company lobbyist) Mark Rey describes the land. Even if that were true, a sale this huge sets a lamentable precedent. Once the public trust is broken for this sale, federal lands across the country could shift from national treasures to political investments, ready to be cashed in at an administration's whim.

Rey's assertion doesn't even hold true for many of the properties in this year's proposed sale. Take the proposed sales in the Ocala National Forest, which include significant parcels of property near or on the Ocklawaha and St. Johns rivers. This plan would encourage houses -- accompanied by septic tanks and fertilized lawns -- along two of Central Florida's most notable rivers.

The environmental impact won't be confined to the newly developed property, so sales threaten adjacent land as well. Nationwide, some of the parcels being sold are sizable, including a 900-plus acre site in Virginia. Many top 400 acres -- enough land to build a mid-sized subdivision.

The administration is right about one thing. Most of the parcels proposed for sale are scattered around the boundaries of national forests. But that doesn't mean the land doesn't have public

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value, as leverage if nothing else. Federal officials have successfully built forests by trading isolated parcels for more valuable land on the edge of or inside a forest's boundaries. Forest land can provide public access points to rivers and lakes, or serve as watersheds that preserve an area's drinking water supply.

During a press conference, Rey said he'd consider a proposal that would allow another government (either a county or state) to receive preferential treatment if it wants to buy property under the program. That doesn't cure this proposal.

A more responsible approach would look at the many companies drilling oil, logging, herding cattle or making other profitable use of public land. In many cases, the levies those corporations pay are criminally low. Asking them to pay a fair share of their profits constitutes a far better solution than selling off chunks of the nation's heritage.

PROPOSED OCALA SALES

- The Ocala National Forest covers 383,573 acres, mostly in Marion County, expanding southeast to include parts of western Volusia County and northeast to include parts of Putnam County.
- It is considered the oldest national forest east of the Mississippi River within the continental United States. Its sand pine scrub ecosystem stands on deep, prehistoric sand dunes.
- The forest provides an important recharge for the Floridan aquifer, due to its porous sands and largely undeveloped character.
- It is home to the threatened Florida scrub jay, sand skink and Florida bonamia plant. Wildlife species include the bald eagle, Florida black bear, Florida manatee, gopher tortoise, indigo snake and red-cockaded woodpecker.
- Recreation areas: Alexander Springs, Fore Lake Recreational Area, Juniper Springs, Lake Eaton Loop Trail, Lake Eaton Sink Hole, Mill Dam Recreation Area, Salt Springs and Salt Springs Trail.
- Wilderness areas: Alexander Springs (7,700 acres), Billies Bay (3,120 acres), Juniper Prairie (13,260 acres), Little Lake George (2,500 acres).

SOURCE: U.S. Forest Service

THE BUDGET PLAN

President Bush's proposed 2007 budget includes a legislative request to allow the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management to sell off land in national forests, grasslands and scenic areas to fund the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act. The budget proposes to phase out the rural assistance act by 2012. This is a list of the known areas proposed for sale:

ALABAMA: 3,220 acres in the Talladega, Bankhead and Conecuh national forests.



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ALASKA: 99 acres in the Tongass and Chugach national forests.

ARIZONA: 1,030 acres in the Apache-Sitgreaves and Kaibab national forests.

ARKANSAS: 3,612 acres in the Ouachita and Ozark national forests.

CALIFORNIA: 79,362 acres in the Angeles, San Bernardino, Sequoia, Sierra, Stanislaus, Eldorado, Tahoe, Plumas, Lassen, Trinity, Six Rivers, Shasta and Klamath national forests.

COLORADO: 21,572 acres in the Arapaho, Roosevelt, Gunnison, Uncompahgre, Pike, San Isabel, Rio Grande, San Juan and White River national forests and the Pawnee and Comanche national grasslands.

FLORIDA: 973 acres in the Ocala National Forest.

GEORGIA: 4,522 acres in the Chattahoochee and Oconee national forests.

IDAHO: 25,464 acres in the Clearwater, Coeur d'Alene, Kaniksu, Nez Perce, St. Joe, Boise, Caribou-Targhee, Payette and Sawtooth national forests and the Caribou-Targhee Curlew Grasslands.

ILLINOIS: 191 acres in the Shawnee National Forest.

INDIANA: 869 acres in the Hoosier National Forest.

KENTUCKY: 4,518 acres in the Daniel Boone National Forest.

LOUISIANA: 3,895 acres in the Kisatchie National Forest.

MICHIGAN: 5,880 acres in the Hiawatha and Ottawa national forests.

MINNESOTA: 2,622 acres in the Superior National Forest.

MISSISSIPPI: 7,503 acres in the Bienville, DeSoto, Holly Springs, Homochitto and Tomigbee national forests.

MISSOURI: 21,566 acres in the Mark Twain National Forest.

MONTANA: 13,948 acres in the Beaverhead, Bitterroot, Custer, Deerlodge, Flathead, Gallatin, Helena, Koot, Kootenai, Lewis & Clark and Lolo national forests.

NEBRASKA: 866 acres in the Nebraska National Forest and Oglala National Grasslands.

NEVADA: 2,146 acres in the Humbolt-Toiyabe National Forest.

NEW MEXICO: 7,447 acres in the Cibola and Lincoln national forests and the Kiowa National Grasslands.

NORTH CAROLINA: 9,828 acres in the Croatan, Nantahala, Pisgah and Uwharrie national forests.

OHIO: 420 acres in Wayne National Forest.

OKLAHOMA: 3,572 acres in Ouachita National Forest and Rita Blanca National Grasslands.

OREGON: 10,581 acres in the Deschutes, Fremont-Winema, Malheur, Mount Hood, Ochoco, Rogue River-Siskiyou, Siuslaw, Umatilla, Umpqua, Wallowa-Whitman and Willamette national forests, the Crooked River National Grasslands and the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area.

SOUTH CAROLINA: 4,665 acres in the Francis Marion and Sumter national forests.

SOUTH DAKOTA: 13,961 acres in the Black Hills National Forest and the Buffalo Gap and Ft. Pierre national grasslands.

TENNESSEE: 2,996 acres in the Cherokee National Forest.

TEXAS: 4,813 acres in the Angelina, Davy Crockett, Sabine and Sam Houston national forests and the Rita Blanca and Caddo-LBJ national grasslands.

UTAH: 5,998 acres in the Dixie, Fishlake, Manti-La Sal, Sawtooth, Uinta and Wasatch-Cache national forests.

VIRGINIA: 5,717 acres in the George Washington-Jefferson National Forest.

WASHINGTON: 7,516 acres in the Colville, Gifford Pinchot, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie, Olympic, Wenatchee and Okanogan national forests and the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area.

WEST VIRGINIA: 4,836 acres in the Monongahela National Forest.

WISCONSIN: 80 acres in the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest.

WYOMING: 17,619 acres in the Black Hills, Medicine Bow and Bridger-Teton national forests and the Thunder Basin National Grasslands.

SOURCE: U.S. Forest Service

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