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## Limit Wilderness Roads

**A**lmost anywhere you go in the West, there's a push to open up more land for energy development or for the use of all-terrain vehicles, snowmobiles and other often damaging and exploitive activities.

The federal government issued a record 3,800 oil and gas permits last year. Pristine federal lands in jeopardy include the Upper Green River Basin and the Red Desert in Wyoming, the Rocky Mountain front in Montana and even the nearby Los Padres National Forest of California, part of it home to the endangered condor. Federal agencies also are pushing to drill 51,000 coal-bed methane gas wells in the Powder River Basin in northeast Wyoming, an operation that could devastate the region's underground water supply.

In addition, the Bush administration is unraveling the commendable Bill Clinton initiative to protect millions of acres of national forest from the construction of more roads, usually built with federal dollars to provide access to logging areas. There is hope, however, for reinstating the no-roads rule. Congressional supporters have written its language into legislation. If it becomes law, as it should, the administration would have to enforce it.

Separate from the attempt to scrap the no-roads rule is a threat to the integrity of wild lands from the reopening of old roads. In Utah, federal and state officials are negotiating the

revival of roads across federal lands built, planned or imagined under an 1866 law designed to promote Western expansion. The measure, referred to by its statute section, RS 2477, was repealed in 1976. But Congress left a loophole allowing existing roads built under the 1866 law to remain.

Now local and state officials, including in Inyo County, Calif., are jumping to preserve their ancient "rights." The problem is in determining what is a real road and what might be merely a livestock trail. A few seem to exist in the imagination of off-road vehicle drivers and coal or gold miners. Interior De-

partment officials say they intend to use common sense, but conservationists are wary because federal and state officials have conferred on a road plan in private. Why this secrecy, when a major complaint of the Bush administration about Clinton initiatives was that local people weren't well consulted?

In Utah, hundreds of miles of these "roads" penetrate regions that are under consideration by Congress for protection as wilderness areas. If the roads are revived, those areas could be disqualified from wilderness designation.

Roads have their place on public lands. The nation needs reasonable timber harvests and more energy resources. Vehicle recreation can make a fine vacation. But a stampede to build every possible road and extract every energy resource threatens to overwhelm and degrade some of the best wild lands left.

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**Push by loggers, drillers  
and snowmobile users  
threatens federal lands.**

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