WILDLANDS CPR

REVIVING WILD PLACES

RIGHTSIZING THE FOREST SERVICE ROAD SYSTEM

Road failures are a common problem on FS lands, especially after storm events. *Flathead NF photo*

The city of Seattle depends on the Cedar River watershed for its clean drinking water. The city is investing $6 million over a 20 year period to remove 200 miles of roads and thus dramatically reduce sedimentation to the municipal watershed. The alternative: a multi-million dollar water filtration plant with ongoing facility costs thereafter. Not only will the road reclamation in the Cedar River watershed ensure clean drinking water for Seattle, it will also provide a significant number of high-wage, high-skill jobs for local residents, thus providing a win-win for the economy.

Washington Dept. of Ecology photo

THE FOREST SERVICE, ROADS, AND CLEAN WATER

According to the Forest Service, national forest lands, and the headwaters and streams they contain, provide drinking water for 66 million Americans. The agency estimates that approximately one-fifth of the water in the US comes from national forest lands. Here are a few quick facts (cited from the FS "Abundant Clean Water" 2007 briefing paper):

- Approximately 3400 communities in 33 states get their drinking water from national forest lands.
- The FS estimates the economic value of the water flowing from national forest lands at $7.2 billion annually (this is an order of magnitude higher than timber/logging).
- Reservoirs on FS lands provide energy generation for more than 18 million homes.

The Forest Service may be the most important supplier of drinking water and clean water in the United States. It is also the largest road management entity in the world. The agency is responsible for 375,000 miles of system roads plus an additional 60,000 miles or more of nonsystem roads across its 193 million acre landscape. Cities, states and federal authorities manage other roads on national forest lands, bringing the total to well above half a million miles of roads cutting across Forest Service lands. These same lands contain about 400,000 miles of streams. Roads cause profound impacts to streams, for example:

- Sediment runoff from roads and trails ends up in streams and rivers, smothering fish eggs and inhibiting nest building.
- Compacted road beds alter hydrology by impeding water infiltration and blocking subsurface water flow.
- Roads constructed on highly erodible soils are prone to severe landslides. Sediments released from landslides have interrupted and degraded the drinking water supplies of numerous communities.
- Chronic sediment can degrade municipal water supplies, potentially causing municipalities to install or upgrade filtration systems.
- Blocked, undersized or improperly installed culverts can prevent fish from reaching spawning habitat.

FACT SHEET

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