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More than 170,000 acres in Midwest national forests, including Shawnee, could be opened to roads, logging and mining under Trump plan



'WE STAND TO LOSE OUR SOLITUDE'

By Christiana Freitag | FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

For 73-year-old Harold "Cricket" Simons, a major appeal of the Shawnee National Forest is what isn't there.

No motorized vehicles. No traffic passing on most trails. No horns or engines breaking the quiet.

Simons travels through the forest on horseback. The former Bloomington, Illinois, rodeo rider spends much of his retirement leading the Illinois chapter of the Back Country Horsemen of America, a national organization of horse-riding volunteers who help maintain trails and public lands.

His five horses are accustomed to the sounds of trail work: the occasional chainsaw or falling tree.

But he said his workhorses, like him, prefer silence.

That's at risk as the Trump administration's Department of Agriculture proposed in August to repeal a 2001 federal rule restricting road construction on national forest lands.

"We stand to lose our solitude in our roadless areas," Simons said.

The repeal of the conservation regulation commonly known as the Roadless Rule, would affect nearly 45 million acres of national forests across the country, including about 10,666 acres in Shawnee.

Across the Midwest, more than 170,000 acres of public lands are protected under the Roadless Rule, including portions of Indiana's Hoosier National Forest, Minnesota's Superior and Chippewa national forests and Michigan's Ottawa and Huron-Manistee national forests.

The proposal is drawing concern from horseback riders like Simons and hunters, hikers and other outdoor recreationists, as well as tribal groups with treaty rights across the Great Lakes region. Conservationists worry that numerous threatened and endangered species will be adversely affected.

"There's a lot to lose here, and everybody needs to be made aware of it," said Kelly Thayer, senior policy advocate with the Environmental Law & Policy Center.

The proposed repeal comes as the U.S. Forest Service is also contending with other changes to federal forest management policy, Thayer said,

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Above: Harold "Cricket" Simons clears a log from a trail in Shawnee National Forest in Illinois on Sept. 21.
E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

ELECTION 2026
U.S. SENATE

Long odds for GOP's Tracy

The Republican nominee is facing a big political challenge against Stratton

By Olivia Olander
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Addressing supporters at an evening fundraiser off Lake Decatur in July, Republican U.S. Senate nominee Don Tracy offered one reason he thinks he has a shot in the general election, despite Democrats winning every statewide contest for more than a decade.


Tracy

"I hear this question up and down the state, 'Don, who is your opponent?'" Tracy said. "I answer that, and I say, 'Well, my opponent is the lieutenant governor. Do you know his or her name?' Nobody knows."

But then he pivoted almost immediately.

"Granted, she has more name ID than I do, so far," Tracy said. "But it's not that much more."

Such is the political challenge for Tracy, a candidate for a statewide office with a unique background — a onetime Democrat who became chair of the Illinois Republican Party, a position he later left amid party turmoil. Nonetheless, he has taken up the GOP mantle to make a long-shot Senate bid.

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INSIDE

Co-pilot used ax in attack, UAE says
The co-pilot was an Omani national who had been barred from flying on his country's airline. **Nation & World, Page B5**

Relive the legend of singer-songwriter
The celebrations for what would have been John Prine's 80th birthday will be lavish and music-filled. **Arts & Entertainment**

Many want an office, just not a conventional one

Chicagoans needing place to work set up in co-working spaces

By Lila Hempel-Edgers
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

By the time he's halfway up a climbing wall, Emerson Boyd is thinking only about which colorful nub might best carry his weight. For a few minutes, he's beyond the reach of incoming emails — a freedom that's hard to come by in the middle of a workday.

"Everyone here is doing their own thing, but they're all working toward some goal that they have," said the 29-year-old software developer, who co-works from First Ascent in the Loop. "The variety is good."

Boyd is part of a growing contradiction in Chicago, a city that simultaneously boasts the nation's second-largest co-working market and some of the highest office vacancy rates in the country. The disparity suggests workers might be looking for something more than a quiet cubicle.

Industry experts say Chicagoans are setting up laptops in spaces that double as climbing gyms and dog parks, trading subsidized parking for culinary classes and on-site podcast studios. Many still need a place to work, but the appeal of the conventional office has soured alongside the work-from-home routine they didn't ask for.

"What people want in an office building has changed," said Sean Boyd, who manages Avison Young's market intelligence team. "But the

See **WORK** on Page A10


Hayden Golemon, 27, climbs at First Ascent climbing gym at Block 37 in downtown Chicago on Thursday. Golemon uses the gym regularly to both work and climb during the week. CHRIS SWEDA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

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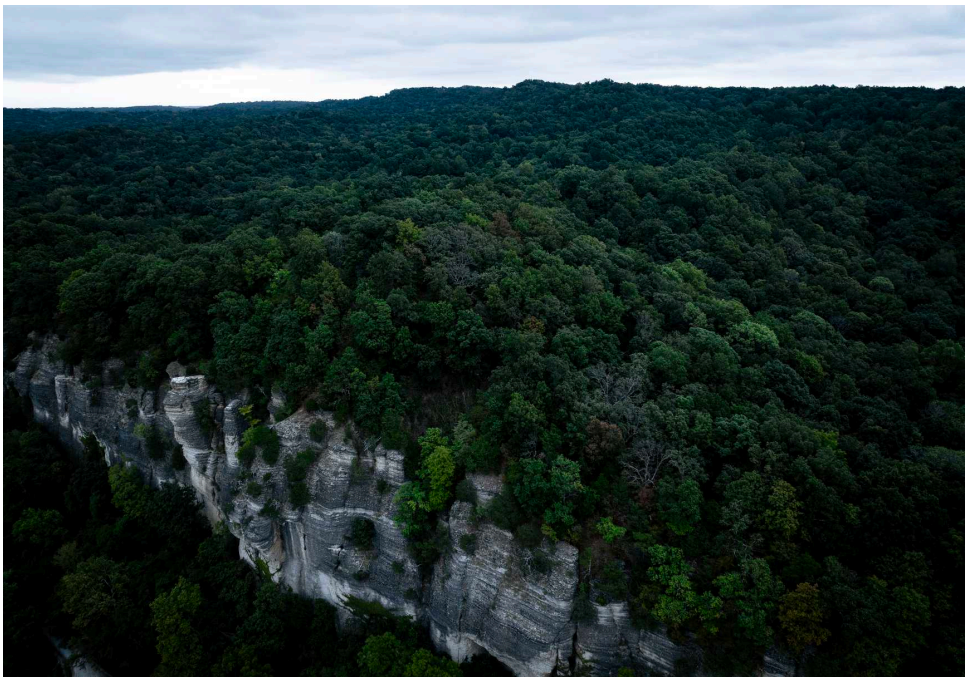
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179th year No. 277
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LaRue Pine Hills in the Shawnee National Forest on Sept. 21. **E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS**

ROADLESS

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creating what he described as a "perfect storm" for public lands.

Along with a proposal to eliminate the Roadless Rule, the USDA and Forest Service revised the agency's Travel Management Rule to allow increased access for motor vehicles on national forest lands. This applies to 193 million acres nationwide, including the Shawnee.

Together with staffing cuts and a Trump executive order to boost timber production in national forests by 25%, these actions have raised questions about how the Forest Service will manage its existing roads and trails — much less additional roads that could be built — and who will benefit.

"In order to mine or in order to log a national forest, roads are required," Thayer said. "So this effort to roll back the Roadless Rule is very much intended to provide access to the timber industry and the mining industry. That's the big national play here."

The Forest Service says repealing the Roadless Rule would not immediately authorize roads, logging or mining in the Shawnee's roadless areas.

"The intent to rescind the 2001 Roadless Rule is to return to local decision making as part of individual national forest and grassland plans, which include robust public involvement and focus on land management decisions at the right scale," said a U.S. Forest Service spokesperson in a Sept. 25 email to the Tribune.

In Illinois, where relatively few undisturbed forests remain, residents and environmentalists say saving these spaces is urgent.

"They're just unbelievable beauty, and you see things you don't see anywhere else," Simons said. "To cut through them is like a crime, in my opinion."



A silica mine near the Shawnee National Forest and its Ripple Hollow roadless area on Sept. 21.



Harold "Cricket" Simons and his wife, Vicki Simons, on their property near Eddyville on Sept. 21.

A 'FRAGMENTED' FOREST

Glaciers smoothed out most of Illinois millions of years ago, creating fertile, flat farmland. But on the edge of that glaciated area is the Shawnee, where a mixture of distinctly rugged geology and ecosystems converge. Hugging the Mississippi and Ohio rivers, it's home to biological diversity unlike anywhere else in Illinois.

From the limestone bluffs and swamps of Larue Pine Hills to "Snake Road," where thousands of reptiles and amphibians migrate across the gravel road every spring and fall, the forest contains some of the state's most distinct landscapes.

"There's more biodiversity in the couple thousand acres of Larue Pine Hills than there is in Smoky Mountain National Park," said Matt Lechner, a retired Shawnee Forest Service employee. "It's outstanding."

But the Shawnee is not one continuous block of public land. The nearly 289,000-acre forest is interspersed with private property, farms, communities and roads, creating a patchwork of public and private lands across southern Illinois.

That makes the remaining relatively intact tracts especially important to preserve, according to conservation groups, particularly in a state like Illinois that has lost much of its native forests.

"At one point, forests covered 40% of Illinois' landscape. And today that number is about 14%," said Amanda Pankau, director of energy and community resiliency at Prairie Rivers Network.

"We don't have very many remaining, and what we do have is highly fragmented," she said. "It's very important that we have very few of these contiguous tracts left, that they are protected."

The Roadless Rule was adopted in 2001 after years of public debate over how much of the country's remaining undeveloped national forest land should be protected from roads and commercial development.

Today, the rule covers tens of millions of acres of National Forest System land.

The Shawnee's roadless areas are scattered across that landscape. The six areas — Bay Creek, Burden Falls, Burke Branch, Clear Springs, Eagle Creek and Ripple Hollow — cover more than 10,000 acres.

They are also part of a larger habitat supporting wildlife, wetlands, waterways and other ecological resources, including endangered species like the Indiana bat and state-threatened species like the timber rattlesnake.

In its announcement of the repeal proposal on Aug. 18, the Trump administration's USDA said the policy has become an obstacle for active forest management.

The USDA argues the repeal would allow for more wildfire-risk reduction work, timber production, jobs and economic development and would return decisions to local forest managers to respond to environmental and economic conditions.

But the USDA's own 300-page environmental impact analysis of the proposed repeal found that eliminating the national rule is "likely to adversely affect" 327 threatened or endangered species and 71 designated critical habitats nationwide.

In the Shawnee, conservationists point to threatened wildlife such as the Indiana bat and timber snake that depend on an intact forest habitat.

"There are two kinds of endangered bats in the Shawnee that are very important to agriculture because they're insect-eating machines," Thayer said. "They do hard work for us."

The proposed repeal also comes as the Trump administration has narrowed the Endangered Species Act and as climate change puts additional pressure on Shawnee's ecosystems.

Lechner said Shawnee's Forest Service faces an even more basic problem: It doesn't have the resources to fully assess the number of species already in the forest.

"The truth of the matter is we don't even really know what we have," he said. "We don't have money to do basic inventory. ... There is just a ton of biodiversity to protect, and you go opening up roads, you're going to change the amount of sediment that's coming down the creek and change the creek."

Lechner echoed American ecologist Aldo Leopold's famous warning about conservation, that society often stands guard over famous works of art while species representing "the work of aeons are stolen from under our noses."

"The 'Mona Lisa' paints a pretty picture," Lechner said. "But the Indiana bat and its ecological role deserves our protection."

THE COSTS OF REPEAL

If the Roadless Rule is repealed, decisions about future road construction and management would return to individual national forests through their forest plans, subject to public involvement and existing environmental laws, according to the Forest Service spokesperson.

This would give local managers greater flexibility to address wildfire risk, forest health, watersheds, timber production and local economic conditions.

Timber production is a core part of the Trump administration's argument for repealing the Roadless Rule, and the Forest Service says removing restrictions would potentially increase the amount of federal forestland available and generate additional revenue.

That argument is particularly relevant in rural communities where the timber industry remains an important source of employment and revenue.

The agency's analysis projects up to $11 million in additional timber revenue from the repeal.

But the same August analysis also projects economic losses tied to the loss of roadless areas. The Forest Service estimates about $9 million in annual losses to outdoor recreation and tourism, along with up to $6 million in lost economic benefits from businesses and wildlife recreation in areas that are no longer roadless.

"So $5 (million) to $11 million in new timber revenue, maybe," Thayer said. "And $15 million in negative economic harm to outdoor recreation and tourism, and another additional $5 (million) to $11 million in economic losses related to the ecosystem benefits that will be lost to cleaning our water, cleaning our air, and securing our climate."

"So the federal government runs the numbers on its own proposal and finds out that we will be far worse off economically each and every year that the Roadless Rule is not in place," Thayer said. "That's their conclusion."

Beyond aiding timber production, repealing the national rule could expand access for mining and other extractive operations, opponents say.

That possibility is particularly relevant in parts of the Shawnee.

Eagle Creek, one of the forest's six roadless areas, sits near southern Illinois landscapes with a long history of coal mining, including active and historic mining areas outside the Shawnee's boundaries.

"Illinois is the fourth-largest coal-producing state. We are still mining a lot of coal," Pankau said.

Ripple Hollow, another roadless area, contains silica deposits.

Pankau emphasized that repeal itself would not mean mining or logging would immediately begin.

"It's not like this is repealed, and all of a sudden they're logging and mining silica at Ripple Hollow, but that would be a possibility," she said.

FORESTS WITH FEWER HANDS

For Simons, the Shawnee is both home and workplace.

He and his wife, Vicki, live with their five horses on property near roadless areas and trail systems. As chair of the Illinois chapter of the Back Country Horsemen of America, Simons works with the Forest Service and leads a team of volunteers who spend thousands of hours maintaining public lands.

His volunteers use horses to haul rocks, clear fallen trees and repair damaged trails — work that can be done without bringing motorized equipment into some of the forest's more remote areas.

"The Back Country horsemen are great," Lechner said. "They haul rocks for us and really help out with trail maintenance, and they understand one of the things about wilderness is you're not supposed to change it."

This support has been especially necessary as Lechner said Shawnee's Forest Service has faced staffing and budget cuts, like the rest of the nation's public lands workforce. When he started in 2003, Lechner said Shawnee's Forest Service had 120 staff members — when he retired in 2020, he said the agency's staff was down to around 50 or 60 employees doing the same amount of work.

Nationally, the Back Country Horsemen of America reported more than 200,000 volunteer service hours last year, with an estimated economic value of about $12 million. Simons said the Illinois chapter contributed roughly $97,000 worth of volunteer labor.

The staffing reductions extend beyond Shawnee. According to reporting from The New York Times, the Trump administration has cut nearly 6,000 Forest Service employees, responsible for managing millions of public lands across the country.

"There's just fewer people to safeguard our forests, and there are fewer protections for the forests," Thayer said. "It's the citizens and it's organizations that are filling the gap where the federal government should really be in the business of protecting

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our public lands, not selling them off."

The work extends beyond trail maintenance. Simons said his team regularly picks up trash and has removed hundreds of illegally dumped tires from the forest.

He worries that additional roads and access could bring more of that work.

"If you build a road, all those things will increase," Simons said. "All the bad influences that roads bring will increase."

The Forest Service also has a substantial backlog of deferred road maintenance, with the agency estimating that cost at more than $9 billion.

"There's far more roads in our national forest than there are miles of interstate highway system in the United States," Thayer said. "It's gotten away from us."

According to the Forest Service, it maintains over 265,000 miles of roads. The interstate system is just under 47,000 miles, the Federal Highway Administration says.

"The bottom line is we can't take care of the roads we have," Lechner said. "So opening up more forest for more roads that they're not going to be able to maintain doesn't make any sense."

'WHIPLASH OF ADMINISTRATIONS'

The debate over the Roadless Rule is also part of a decades-long cycle over how much control the federal government should have over undeveloped national forest lands.

The Roadless Rule was adopted in 2001 after receiving overwhelming public support, Thayer said.

"So many people commented on it that it set a record for the most comments ever on a federal rule," he said.

But since then, the Roadless Rule has been on the chopping block with each administration. A proposed repeal was issued during the Bush years, and then again last June.

"There have been attempts to scrap the roadless rules since the very beginning," Thayer said. "It's really a saga of one administration that could come in and lift it up, and the next administration could come in and seek to overturn everything. And that seesaw battle has continued across the entire 25 years of the existence of the Roadless Rule."

Indigenous people have also had to navigate the "whiplash of administrations," according to Jenny Van Sickle, an outreach specialist with the Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission, an advocacy organization that works with the Ojibwe tribes in Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota.

"Tribal nations have been here since time immemorial," she said. "We can be a helpful force in land stewardship, and we will work with any administration."

Among the affected roadless areas, 196,000 acres are within Ojibwe territory. Van Sickle said 11 member tribes rely on treaty rights to harvest resources such as maple sap, cedar boughs and other forest products, essential for guaranteeing traditional ways of life on indigenous lands.

"Treaty rights are not optional," Van Sickle said. "And it's not a special privilege that anybody granted."

She said changes to public lands can have implications beyond the boundaries of an individual forest because development, pollution or habitat loss can affect the resources tribes depend on.

"Shifting that responsibility to have it piecemeal in the states risks the integrity of a forest that is crossing boundaries it doesn't know exists," Van Sickle said. "It's really difficult to treat that as a segmented system when it's all very connected, like rivers and oceans."

Because of these risks, many conservation groups and lawmakers are anxious to see permanent protections.

In 2025, Democratic Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois co-sponsored the Roadless Area Conservation Act, which would codify the rule's protections in federal law. The legislation, which was reintroduced after earlier attempts, has not advanced out of committee.

"Shawnee National Forest, one of Illinois' most beautiful landscapes, welcomes thousands of visitors each year who come to enjoy the view and hiking trails," Durbin said in a Sept. 18 statement to the Tribune. "The Roadless Rule, which has overwhelming public support, has protected portions of Shawnee National Forest for more than two decades, and the Trump Administration's attempts to strip the rule is shameful."

Durbin also introduced legislation last year specifically addressing the Shawnee, including a proposal to establish 12,700 protected areas within the forest, called special management areas. Ripple Hollow and Burke Branch, two areas that are currently at risk of losing Roadless Rule protections would be within those special areas.

PUBLIC PUSH

The USDA first announced a deadline of Sept. 21 for public input, but environmentalists pushed back to get it extended to Tuesday. Thayer said he still believes the process has been too rushed.

"One has to wonder why, when the federal government proposes something that it believes is a good idea, it would minimize public comment and hold no public meetings at all," he said. "It's very much a rush job to do something that the Trump administration absolutely knows is wildly at odds with what the public wants."

ELPC has asked the public to sign a petition opposing the repeal. Last month, 164 members of Congress also signed a letter opposing the proposal.

Simons hopes people speak up.

"Once they change these things, you can't just go and put them back," he said. "To say we're going to take this road out and plant trees back where the road is, it just doesn't work that way. It takes 50 to 60 years."

Christiana Freitag is a freelancer.

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