

National Forest Service Road Decommissioning: An attempt to read through the numbers (Field Notes)

Article Information

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Road decommissioning has been defined as “the physical treatment of a roadbed to restore the integrity of associated hillslopes, channels, and flood plains and their related hydrologic, geomorphic, and ecological processes and properties” (Switalski et al. in press). In practical terms, decommissioning is a process in which the Forest Service (FS) determines that a road is no longer needed or desirable and then physically removes it from the ground, the road database, and/or published maps. Road decommissioning should not be confused with road closure. Road closure implies temporarily prohibiting access to a road. This is an important distinction because some forests say they are “decommissioning” roads while in reality they are “closing” roads. For example, they may be placing a gate or barrier on the road entrance, but are leaving culverts and the road prism in place.

The FS is “decommissioning” thousands of miles of roads for a variety of reasons. The most common are:

- to eliminate environmental degradation;
- to reduce impacts associated with motorized access;
- to meet specific management requirements defined in Forest plans or court orders; and,
- to avoid long-term road maintenance costs.

Decommissioning activities employed by the FS include reestablishing natural drainage patterns and stream channels, out-sloping the road surface, scattering debris on the roadbed, ripping the soil and planting vegetation on the road bed, blocking the entrance to a road, and posting closure signs. One or more of these activities may be used. The common denominator in FS road decommissioning is removing the road from the road system database, but even this is not certain. An on-the-ground investigation is generally required to determine exactly which activities were used to decommission a particular road.

During the summer of 2003, Wildlands CPR conducted a survey of all national forest road decommissioning. This project was prompted, in part, by FS claims that from 1998-2002 they decommissioned fourteen miles of road for every one mile built. While we confirmed that the agency is decommissioning roads, we also learned that they have no consistent definition for “decommissioning.”

In this study, our goal was to collect data to illustrate what activities the FS employs to decommission roads and in what proportions. Is the agency actually “decommissioning” roads or

simply “closing” them? It is also important to understand which kinds of roads (system or non-system) are being decommissioned. System roads were engineered, constructed, and inventoried by the FS; non-system roads were either created by users or constructed for timber sales, grazing, and mining, but never placed on the inventory (and are therefore difficult to categorize). It appears that in many cases, the FS is taking credit for decommissioning nonsystem roads while not taking responsibility for their development.

Based on our research, it appears that the FS is investing in road removal and stream channel restoration in certain places, while investing very little in other places. In all cases, ground truthing will be necessary to determine what level of work is being done in reported road decommissioning programs.

Methods

We contacted the road manager or lead engineer at each regional office of the FS and requested the Road Accomplishment Report Summaries (RARS) for 1997 – 2002. Each forest in the National Forest System must submit this annual report, which tracks additions to and deletions from the road system, maintenance, construction, reconstruction, decommissioning miles and associated costs. The RARS also tracks whether activity occurred on system or nonsystem roads. We used a formal Freedom of Information Act request to acquire data from Regions 1 and 6.

Results and Discussion

According to the RARS report, the FS is decommissioning roads in nearly every national forest in the United States. Below we articulate the most important and significant results of the data we gathered and describe noteworthy regions for future investigation. The full report is available on our website and also identifies noteworthy forests.

National Results (All FS Regions)

Nationwide, the FS is decommissioning an average of 2,038 miles of road per year (system and non-system roads combined) at a cost of \$3,911 per mile. When broken down, the FS is decommissioning 1,290 miles of system road per year and 748 miles of non-system road per year at a cost of \$3,521 per mile and \$4,591 per mile respectively (Figures 1, 2). It is worth noting that the cost per mile for non-system road decommissioning is higher than that for system road decommissioning; this is entirely due to the inclusion of Alaska in this data. Alaska spends more than \$22,000 per mile to decommission non-system roads, nearly 350% more than the rest of the country.

When Alaska is taken out of the picture the cost-per-mile data changes significantly while the miles-per-year data is barely affected. In the lower forty-eight, the FS is decommissioning 2,019 miles (system and non-system combined) at a cost of \$2,803 per mile. This includes 1,281 miles of system roads per year and 737 miles of non-system roads per year at an average cost per mile of \$3,365 and \$2,030 respectively.

Nationally, the number of road miles decommissioned per year peaked in 1999 and then dropped by nearly 65% by 2002. Expenditures on road decommissioning rose steadily after 1999, peaking in 2001 and then dropping 55% in 2002. Costs-per-mile were highest in 1998, largely due to the

inclusion of Alaska in our data sample. However, besides 1998, costs-per-mile have not fluctuated much, rising steadily through 2002.

Noteworthy Regions

- Region 6 (Pacific Northwest) decommissions the most miles of road (system and non-system combined) and the most miles of system road in the country.
- Regions 1 (Northern) and 3 (Southwest) are also decommissioning relatively high numbers of system roads, averaging more than 300 miles per year.
- Regions 5 (Pacific Southwest) and 10 (Alaska) are decommissioning relatively few miles of road but are making a considerable investment in the decommissioning they do accomplish.
- Regions 2 (Rocky Mountains) and 4 (Intermountain) are decommissioning relatively high numbers of road (generally non-system roads) for only limited financial investment (with the exception of the Payette National Forest).
- Regions 8 (Southern) and 9 (Eastern) are decommissioning relatively few miles of road at a low cost- per-mile investment.

Conclusions

This research has made it clear that the term “decommissioning” can mean a variety of different things. There is tremendous variation in the number of miles being decommissioned, the costs associated with decommissioning, and the activities being employed to decommission roads across the country. Ultimately, all that can be assured is that a decommissioned road likely has been removed from the FS database. In this vein, the term “decommissioning” must be qualified if it is to represent some sort of on-the-ground accomplishment for the FS. The next logical step would be to document what is being accomplished on the ground.

A full version of this report is available online at <http://www.wildlandscpr.org/resources> . We recently sent the full report along with our road removal economics report to many forest advocates. Using the two reports together, activists will be able to gauge the potential for economic benefits from road decommissioning in their region. We hope to work with many of these organizations to conduct inspections and determine what is actually happening on the ground. Please contact us if you're interested in conducting a groundtruthing project on your forest.

— *Ryan Schaffer recently completed this report as an internship with Wildlands CPR. He is currently pursuing a law degree at Lewis & Clark College.*