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Stop the road warriors

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The road warriors are at it again. If they have their way, thousands of miles of roads could be slashed across federal public lands that in the past have been protected from such destruction.

Pristine national parks, monuments and wilderness areas we cherish for their natural beauty and unspoiled vistas may be crisscrossed by a web of roads.

Gov. Bill Owens and state natural resources Director Greg Walcher are among the officials behind this threat.

Each wrote to Interior Secretary Gale Norton this spring saying roads could be added in wilderness study areas, national parks, national wildlife refuges, national monuments, Bureau of Land Management properties and designated wilderness areas. It could impact private lands, too.

The spark for the controversy is Revised Statute 2477, a 19th century federal law that reads "The right of way for the construction of highways over public lands, not reserved for public uses, is hereby granted." RS 2477 was repealed by Congress in 1976, but the issue is whether roadways in existence before can be claimed for future use as roads, and that's the basis for what Owens and Walcher are suggesting.

Utah has led the way to carve more roads on previously protected lands, and Colorado's Moffat County is equally zealous. In January, the Moffat County Commissioners unveiled a map claiming more than 2,000 miles of routes - including trails and paths - that could become highways, including 240 miles in Dinosaur National Monument, 53 miles in Browns Park National Wildlife Refuge, and miles within every wilderness study area, citizen proposed wilderness and Forest Service roadless area in the county.

The Owens-Walcher duo and others would pave over Paradise.

Earlier this month, 21 local, state and national conservation groups asked Owens to withdraw his proposal; there's been no answer. The conservationists noted the proposal included no environmental review, no restraints on road expansion and no minimal standards for defining road location, size or even the legitimacy of claims to be a road.

One hundred members of the U.S. Congress wrote Norton on April 16 expressing grave concern over permitting more roads on federal land and urging the Interior Department to suspend such

activity until Congress addresses the issue. "To do otherwise would be contrary to sound policy and would risk undermining proper stewardship of the federal lands," read the letter in part

Democratic Sen. Jeff Bingaman of New Mexico reminded Norton that "No appropriation of public land can be made for any purpose, but by the authority of Congress," and charged she had developed this new policy in secret, announcing it as final policy even though it is at odds with judicial precedent and previous department policies.

Some people want more roads on public lands so it's easier to cut timber, drill for oil and gas, or foster other development. Some Westerners don't think our public lands belong to the American public, only to the locals, and hate any kind of restrictions or public land management.

Protection of the public's land, holding it as a trust for future generations, is considered hogwash.

Oddly, Owens fought to get \$10 million from the legislature to promote state tourism. Now he would help destroy the very scenic beauty that lures our visitors. How can a state leader be so short-sighted?

Any way you look at it, this proposal is a destructive attack on the scenic inheritance of millions of Americans.

Our souls need untouched beauty that remind us there are places where nature reigns. Nobody's making more natural lands.

To propose more roads on our national inheritance is true highway robbery - of the American people. Coloradans who are the caretakers of these precious lands must refuse to let them be irreparably defiled.

For more information, see www.highway-robbery.org.

Joanne Ditmer's column on environmental and urban issues for The Post began in 1962.