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A statement from SELC on Governor Mark Sanford's petition to protect South Carolina roadless areas

The Southern Environmental Law Center lauded Governor Mark Sanford's decision today to file a petition with the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture seeking full and lasting protection for almost 8,000 acres of premiere mountain and coastal forests in the Sumter and Francis Marion national forests in South Carolina, which are managed by the U.S. Forest Service.

Gov. Sanford is only the third governor – all from the South – to present such a petition to the Agriculture Secretary under a federal rule adopted in May 2005 pertaining to the 58.5 million 'roadless' acres on America's national forests. In December, former Virginia Governor Mark Warner petitioned for protection of roadless areas in his state; Virginia Governor Tim Kaine reiterated the request on March 1. Governor Mike Easley of North Carolina filed his petition for his state on March 9.

"The strong stand that Governor Sanford has taken today to defend these special places sends a clear message to Washington that he wants these areas protected for citizens and wildlife," said, David Carr, Public Lands Project Director at the Southern Environmental Law Center, a nonprofit group which has worked for two decades to protect the roadless areas in the South. "I know that the thousands of South Carolinians who want these roadless areas protected are proud of the stand Governor Sanford has taken today." Over the last several years, approximately 10,000 South Carolinians have sent comments to the federal government in favor of preserving the remaining roadless areas of the national forests.

Gov. Sanford's petition highlights the importance of these areas for sustaining the recreation and tourism industry in South Carolina. Gov. Sanford also emphasized the important role these areas play in providing clean water for downstream communities and for aquatic life. Those in the Francis Marion host important wetland systems. He asks that until a protective rule for South Carolina is in place, no logging, road building or other development activities take place in these roadless areas.

The petition calls on the Agriculture Secretary to protect all of South Carolina's inventoried roadless areas consistent with the provisions of the Roadless Area Conservation Rule of 2001, which covered all 58.5 million roadless acres in the U.S. In May 2005, that rule was overturned and replaced with a process by which governors must petition the secretary to protect the roadless areas in their states. The elimination of the 2001 rule is being challenged in federal court by governors or attorney generals from four western states. On March 2, more than 250,000 citizens – including more than 1,500 from South Carolina – filed a formal request to the Bush Administration that the 2001 rule be reinstated.

Founded in 1986, SELC is the only non-profit regional organization dedicated to protecting the native forests, wetlands, air and water quality, wildlife habitat and rural landscapes in Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia. SELC works in partnership with more than 100 diverse groups on legal advocacy, policy reform and public education to achieve lasting environmental protections.