The United States Forest Service's most important job is balancing the many needs and uses of the 193 million acres of public land it manages. But the Trump administration is preparing to abandon the process that makes it possible, eliminating public participation from the overwhelming majority of decisions affecting our national forests. If the Forest Service has its way, visitors won't know what's coming until logging trucks show up at their favorite trailheads or a path for a gas pipeline is cleared below a scenic vista.

At stake is how the Forest Service complies (or doesn't) with the National Environmental Policy Act, our nation's most important environmental law. The law requires every government agency to look for less harmful ways of meeting its goals. To that end, agency decisions must be based on solid science and made in the sunlight of public accountability. Each federal agency has some leeway to implement the law, but the Forest Service's newly proposed rules would instead circumvent it, creating loopholes for logging projects, road construction and even permits for pipelines and other utilities.

Public participation is important because our national forests are as vast and complex as they are beloved. There is no formula for management; cutting trees isn't inherently good or bad. It depends, always, on the context. Just over 75 percent of national forest lands are found in the arid West, where logging practices can either exacerbate or mitigate the risk of wildfire. The remainder is split between Alaska, with its vast old-growth forests and untouched wilderness, and the extremely diverse forests of the East, where you can walk through a dozen ecosystems in a day's hike.
The social and economic contexts of these lands are as complex as their ecologies. Our national forests’ summits, white water rivers and a trail system nearly 160,000 miles long anchor the outdoor recreation economy, contributing more than $13 billion each year to our economy and supporting 205,000 jobs. Though it provides only about a fifth of the overall economic effect of outdoor recreation, timber harvesting on national forests is vitally important to many rural economies. And national forests are also our single most important source for clean drinking water, filtering out sediment and other pollutants for 180 million Americans.

Harmonizing these uses is impossible without listening to the public — the people who use the forests and know them best. But the Forest Service is now proposing to clear the way for logging and road-building. In an attempt to keep pace with the administration’s ambitious and growing timber targets, the agency has been speeding through its “shelf stock” of approved projects — timber sales that have been vetted by the public, reviewed by scientists and improved based on feedback from both. With those projects drying up, the agency is now looking for shortcuts to get more timber on the shelf by allowing decisions to be made behind closed doors.
Far too often, the Forest Service proposes logging in rare old-growth forests, near sensitive streams, or on steep, fragile slopes. Or it proposes building new roads or permitting pipelines in undeveloped backcountry areas. Under current law, new roads and all but the smallest and least consequential timber sales require, at a minimum, advance public notice and the opportunity for the public to comment and suggest improvements.

Most of the time, bad projects are relocated or improved because of public input. In fact, on the Southern Appalachian national forests where I work, public input is responsible for reducing or avoiding harm to old-growth, roadless areas, rare species and habitats, and soil and water 77.4 percent of the time.

But under the Trump administration’s proposal, a host of potentially harmful projects — including timber sales of up to 4,200 acres (about 6.6 square miles), construction of up to 5 miles of roads, and permits for pipelines and fracking pads — would be approved without public involvement. Without accountability, harms will multiply: more logging in the wrong places, more roads built in remote areas, more pipelines and utility rights of way fragmenting habitats. And there will be no chance for individuals to speak up to protect the special places that matter to them most.

This is happening at a time when the Forest Service is slashing its own budget, and lacks the resources to evaluate what it’s doing. By eliminating the opportunity for public comment, the Forest Service is abandoning the chance to get meaningful advice for free. In the short run, the proposal will be bad for forest users, bad for wildlife and bad for local economies that depend on recreation. In the long run, it will hurt timber economies too. The public tolerates commercial logging on public lands only because passionate forest advocates have found ways, working with industry representatives and agency professionals, to minimize harm and even to harness logging for ecological good. If the Forest Service abandons the process that makes this possible, it will undermine the cooperation that allows us to share our public lands.

The Forest Service’s proposal is an attack on the very idea of public lands — that America’s unfenced lands belong as much to a single hunter or hiker as to powerful industry interests. But the proposal isn’t final yet, and the public has an important opportunity now, until Aug. 12, to remind the agency that the public values its voice in the management of national forests. Please join me in submitting comments today at OurForestsOurVoice.org. Unless we speak up now, it could be our last chance.