



Oppose Sealaska Lands Bill

Land Transfer Bill (S.881/H.R.2099) Spurs
Conflict in Tongass National Forest

Conflict is the not the way to finalize Southeast Alaska Native land entitlements

In the near future, Congress is expected to take action on the controversial “Sealaska bill” (H.R.2099/S.881). House and Senate Committees may soon vote on and advance the controversial legislation enabling it to be ready for the inclusion in a potential omnibus public lands bill. The Sealaska legislation, which has drawn widespread opposition in Alaska and nationally, should not be the bitter pill that needs to be swallowed in order to gain a larger package of conservation legislation for wild places across the country.

The bill would allow the Sealaska Corporation to select some of the highest value lands within the Tongass National Forest. The controversial land selection proposal threatens the unique and rare rainforest environment and could adversely impact small communities that depend on access to public lands for their well-being and livelihoods. Leading local industries including tourism and commercial fishing could see their economic viability impacted. In the Tongass, where land issues too often pit neighbor against neighbor, the Sealaska bill (S.881/H.R. 2099) pending before Congress only serves to codify the conflict.

Lopsided Legislation

- Settlement of Sealaska’s land entitlements can be accomplished without further congressional action. Currently the Sealaska Corporation may finalize remaining land entitlements, approximately 65,000 acres, from within the withdraw areas established by the U.S. Congress under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 (ANCSA). The proposed legislation would allow the Sealaska Corporation to select all of its remaining entitlement lands from outside of currently allowable boundaries established by ANCSA.
- The legislation targets for clear-cut logging some of the richest and most biologically productive lands in the Tongass including inventoried roadless areas. It also targets for private development extraordinary bays and river valleys throughout the Tongass. These areas are among the most used and visited by the southeast Alaska residents, commercial fishermen, local outfitters and guides, and visitors to the famed Inside Passage.
- According to the U.S. Forest Service, passage and implementation of the Sealaska proposal would require a “Forest Plan Revision based on the magnitude of the changes in land use designations.” This determination is warranted “as a result of net losses in the Conservation Strategy, the lack of ability in making up key lands associated with old-growth reserves, effects on the [timber program], and impacts associated with other existing uses.”

Balanced Solutions—A Better Way Forward

There is an alternative. Over the past several years, a diverse set of stakeholders have begun to break down barriers and move toward a shared vision for the Tongass. This dialogue has the potential to produce groundbreaking results to resolve the Sealaska land entitlements, secure a sustainable future for the local economy, and provide durable protection for valuable areas of America’s rainforest. Unfortunately, the Sealaska bill undermines the dialogue at a critical juncture and reaffirms a divisive way of doing business. Congress should support a comprehensive and shared vision for the Tongass and reject the Sealaska bill—a unilateral and controversial piece of legislation.

Logging Zones

The legislation seeks to remove from public ownership biologically and culturally valuable lands and open them to logging by the Sealaska Timber Corporation. Sealaska plans to continue to intensively clear-cut the vast majority of their land selections.

- The Forest Service currently manages these lands for multiple uses and has announced a transition plan to ensure a sustainable future for the Tongass. This transition will be adversely affected by the Sealaska bill. Under private ownership, clear-cut logging of old-growth forests would be the priority.
- The proposed lands selections target Prince of Wales Islands and smaller barrier islands which have already been severely impacted by decades of clearcut logging. Remarkably, despite previous logging, the islands contain some of the most biologically productive old-growth forest lands in the Tongass National Forest.



Sealaska Corporation clearcuts
Kasaan Peninsula, Prince of Wales Island.

“Futures” Sites

- The legislation identifies numerous “futures” sites, such as Upper Tenakee Inlet, across the Tongass National Forest to be removed from the public domain and transferred to the Sealaska Corporation, a private company. The legislation does little to describe how future management and use of these sites might occur.
- The majority of the sites are in the middle of popular anchorages, hunting and fishing hotspots, and/or sit on the edge of designated Wilderness areas.
- The legislation provides little definition of the scale of potential commercial enterprises on these sites. Without limitations, there is nothing to prevent private corporate uses that would dramatically impact the remote character and existing public uses of these sites.
- Commercial development of these sites could foreclose the possibility of future conservation protections, impact local economies, create confusing and multiple jurisdictional issues between federal agencies, state agencies, municipalities and the corporation and, most importantly, displace existing multiple uses of the sites.



Upper Tenakee Inlet – photo by John Schoen

Background on the Sealaska Native Corporation

- With 290,000 acres of land and an additional 560,000 acres of subsurface rights, the Sealaska Corporation a for-profit corporation, is the largest private landholder in southeast Alaska. It is also the largest of 13 regional native corporations in Alaska established under the ANCSA.
- After 3 decades of extensive and intensive logging, the Sealaska Corporation has left a legacy of expansive clear-cuts across most of the lands they have already selected.

About the Tongass National Forest and Alaska Wilderness League

On our continent’s shimmering western edge, lies a mist-shrouded place of emerald islands with towering ancient spruce, rugged mountains, abundant wildlife, and fast-running rivers bursting with fish. It is our Tongass National Forest – America’s rainforest in southeast Alaska. It is a place where we do not have to talk about how things used to be, but can appreciate what we have today.

Rising majestically from the deep, clear waters of Alaska’s Inside Passage, this is a land of huge bears grown fat on salmon, eagles soaring the endless skies, and 500-year-old trees standing silent sentry over a rich and verdant world. We can make decisions about America’s rainforest that we can be proud of—balanced decisions which allow us to continue to experience and use the rainforest and its resources, without losing them.

Alaska Wilderness League is working in Alaska and Washington DC, and everywhere in between, as an advocate for the Tongass. This national and natural treasure belongs to all Americans, and we have the opportunity to conserve this special place for future generations. With your help and your voice, the League is working to ensure our actions today keep the Tongass special.