

Forest Service Action in the Tongass National Forest Fails to Protect Roadless Areas

What is Happening in the Tongass?

On April 30, 2007, the Forest Service closed a public comment period on its draft plan for the Tongass National Forest in Alaska. The proposed plan is the latest step in a court-ordered revision of the 1997 Tongass Land Management Plan.



The revision was ordered more than a year ago by a federal court which concluded the 1997 plan violated the law. According to the court, the 1997 plan was “fatally infected” and the Forest Service had “mised the public” during its development when they admittedly miscalculated market demand for the Tongass National Forest logging program. The Forest Service had doubled the estimated market demand for trees from the rainforest in southeast Alaska. The overall effect of the error was to exaggerate logging levels and open up much more pristine and wild forest land than was necessary.

The Forest Service’s draft plan, technically an amendment to the 1997 plan, contains a total of seven alternatives with a range of logging levels and roadless area acres open to logging. Unfortunately, the Forest Service’s “proposed action” alternative in the draft plan leaves open to logging the majority of roadless areas containing old-growth forest.

The Tongass National Forest is the only forest nationwide where commercial logging is allowed in roadless areas. In December 2003, the Bush administration exempted the Tongass from the national Roadless Rule which prohibits most commercial logging in roadless areas of all other national forests.

Why Roadless Area Logging Doesn’t Make Sense

With the draft plan’s bias toward logging, the Bush administration is clinging to a bygone era and continuing to hold Tongass roadless areas in trust for the timber industry not the American people. The level of logging targeted by the Forest Service in their “proposed action” alternative is exactly the same as the target of the level in the 1997 Plan and more than five times what southeast Alaska’s independent sawmills have logged annually in the past 15 years.



The draft plan’s emphasis on high logging targets runs counter to Forest Service own economists projections that much lower levels of logging have the “greatest likelihood” of meeting future demand for timber from the Tongass. Instead of changing the plan to fit the facts, the Forest Service is trying to change the facts to fit the plan.

What is at Stake?

The Tongass timber program has been a perennial money-loser for decades, forcing U.S. taxpayers to waste \$1 billion since 1982 logging the rare stands of old-growth rainforest. The inaccurate demand projections have forced the taxpayer to bear the burden of an inflated

timber program and unnecessary, expensive new logging roads. According to an independent analysis of Forest Service data, the agency has lost an average of \$40 million annually for the past 25 years.

The Tongass National Forest in Alaska is America's Rainforest. It was established by Teddy Roosevelt in 1907 and is the largest intact temperate rainforest in the world. Its giant Sitka Spruce and other old growth trees are home to wolves, bears, salmon and Bald Eagles that have disappeared from many other parts of the country.

What is Next?

On April 30, the Forest Closed a 90-day public comment period on the draft. The Forest Service is expected to release its final plan for the Tongass National Forest in late August or early September 2007. Over 70 Members of Congress added their voices to a public chorus critical of logging practices in the Tongass National Forest in Alaska. Congressional support for significant changes in the Tongass National Forest timber program was echoed by a diversity of interests.

- § Twenty-seven North American scientists with expertise on the Tongass pointed out that the Tongass, which represents the largest remaining tracts of coastal rainforest in the world, contains species that "have declined or become listed as threatened throughout their ranges to the south."
- § Hunting and angling groups from across the country asked the Forest Service to pursue a common-sense direction in the Tongass which protects the most valuable watersheds for fish and game, allows for a timber industry which can operate off the over 5,000 miles of existing roads in the forest, and focuses on restoration work that would be beneficial to fish and game.
- § Southeast Alaska communities, businesses, tribes, and residents urged the Forest Service to safeguard additional key community use areas and wild lands and end the subsidy for the timber industry which is prioritized at the expense of taxpayers and other uses of the forest including businesses which depend on an intact forest, recreation and subsistence.
- § Corporate leaders from the home-building and outdoor industries called upon the Forest Service to protect roadless areas and focus a balance, sustainable timber industry on the already developed and roaded portions of the forest.
- § Over 120 conservation organizations from across the country called on the Forest Service to embrace the national consensus to protect the remaining roadless areas in America's rainforest, including protecting as wilderness the highest value watersheds.

What Can Congress Do?

Led by Representatives Robert Andrews (D-NJ) and Steve Chabot (R-OH), the U.S. House of Representatives has twice voted overwhelmingly in favor of ending taxpayer subsidies for logging roads in the Tongass National Forest. The amendment is making a difference on the ground in southeast Alaska. Since first passing the House, the road budget for the Tongass has steadily declined.

Members of Congress should continue to support ending wasteful subsidies in the Tongass National Forest.