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Revised Sealaska Bill Still Threatens Communities and Fish and Wildlife

Revised bill remains significantly flawed, targets important fish and wildlife habitat and community use areas

Washington, DC – Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) released a revised version of the Sealaska bill (S. 881) which fails to alleviate concerns raised about the legislation by a broad array of Tongass stakeholders. The controversial legislation proposes to transfer public lands in the Tongass National Forest to the Sealaska Regional Corporation for the purposes of clear-cut logging and other development.

“We recognize that Senator Murkowski considered some conservation issues relative to the Sealaska legislation,” said Laurie Cooper Rainforest Program Director at Alaska Wilderness League. “Unfortunately, the proposal fundamentally remains a single stakeholder solution. The few conservation amendments to the proposed legislation simply fail in their scope and scale to mitigate the negative impact of Sealaska’s logging and development activity would have on the health of the forest itself, and on the sustainable industries it supports, such as commercial fishing and tourism.”

“The proposed revisions do not address the basic problems with this bill,” said Eric Myers, Audubon Alaska Policy Director. “The legislation would provide Sealaska unprecedented new authority to ‘high grade’ public lands in some of the most ecologically and economically valuable areas across the Tongass. The revised bill still fails to provide balance to protect the public interest in hunting, fishing, recreation, tourism, subsistence, and other important public uses of the Tongass.” Myers added that while Audubon Alaska supports Sealaska receiving its remaining lands under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, no new legislation is needed for that to happen.

“The proposed changes are token changes that fail to address the larger communities concerns,” said Andrew Thoms, Sitka Conservation Society’s Executive Director. “The bill selects lands that are treasured by local residents for their ecological, subsistence, and recreational values. There continues to be numerous concerns about this bill and many details that are uncertain.”

“The Tongass is at a critical juncture as the Forest Service makes good on its plan to transition away from clear-cut old-growth logging to a more diverse program focused on restoration,

second growth, and other forest management activities,” said Karen Hardigg, The Wilderness Society’s Alaska Forest Program Manager. “This bill throws a huge hurdle in front of realizing this new vision for the Tongass National Forest.”

“We agree that finalizing Sealaska’s entitlement claims should be a priority, but we will oppose any proposal that places the region’s diverse values at risk,” said Michael Degnan, Washington Representative for the Sierra Club. “Unfortunately, this latest proposal still significantly threatens the Tongass’ unique recreational and wildlife values.”

The amended version of the bill was presented to Senator Bingaman, Chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, where it may be considered for advancement in the next several weeks. There is some speculation that the legislation, despite the opposition from a wide array of residents in Southeast Alaska and conservation organizations, will be the bitter pill attached to a larger omnibus public lands bill intended to conserve important wilderness areas across the country.

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