

* Alaska Wilderness League * Audubon * Earthjustice * Sierra Club *
* Southeast Alaska Conservation Council *

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Conservation groups appeal old growth logging in Big Thorne Sale and Tongass Forest Plan

(JUNEAU, Alaska) Two coalitions of conservation groups filed Notices of Appeal before the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals yesterday from recent district court opinions approving old growth logging in the Tongass National Forest. In one case, four groups challenged the U.S. Forest Service's Big Thorne old growth timber sale and associated road construction. In a separate lawsuit, a partially overlapping set of groups challenged provisions in the Tongass Land Management Plan that the Forest Service relies on when preparing old growth sales across much of southeast Alaska.

The Big Thorne sale is by far the largest Tongass old growth sale in decades. The conservation groups argue that it undercuts the region's billion-dollar fishing and tourism industries while continuing an unsustainable log export industry. The groups are also concerned about damage to vital habitat for salmon, bears, Sitka black-tailed deer, goshawks and the Alexander Archipelago wolf, and impacts to sport and subsistence hunters as well as recreational use of the forest.

The Big Thorne sale would clear-cut more than 6,000 acres of old growth rainforest on Prince of Wales Island. Though the Forest Service estimates the sale would cost taxpayers \$13 million, the economics of recent sales indicate taxpayer costs could eventually climb to more than \$100 million. The Forest Service has been widely criticized for offering old growth sales at an economic loss to American taxpayers and its Tongass timber program is currently under review by the federal General Accounting Office. Timber makes up less than 1% of economic activity in southeast Alaska.

By contrast, economic reports value southeast Alaska's fishing and tourism industries as each contributing approximately \$1 billion annually¹. Some reports suggest road building and industrial activity associated with Big Thorne would harm fish habitat and has been inadequately analyzed

¹ Economic Contributions and Impacts of Salmonid Resources in Southeast Alaska, prepared by TCW Economics for Trout Unlimited, July 2010, at <http://americansalmonforest.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/EconReportFull.pdf>
Economic Impact of Visitors to Southeast Alaska, 2010-11, prepared by MacDowell Group for Alaska Wilderness League, August 2012, at http://www.alaskawild.org/wp-content/uploads/mcdowell_report_final.pdf

by the Forest Service². Wild coho runs, an economic staple for the region's troll fleet, are particularly sensitive to habitat impacts to headwater streams.

While concerns have been raised that the Big Thorne sale is vital to a local mill, the groups presented evidence to the court of ample timber supply from State of Alaska timber sales as well as existing sales under contract to maintain operations. Additionally, in seeking to halt the old growth sale, the groups exempted the project's second-growth and stewardship components.

The separate suit over the management plan challenges its failure to ensure that adequate old growth is left after timber sales for stable populations of wildlife – including Sitka black-tailed deer. It also alleges that the Forest Service failed when adopting the plan to give the public an accurate picture of how plan implementation would affect wildlife and those – like subsistence hunters – who rely on healthy wildlife populations.

Quotes from Conservation Groups:

“We’re looking for a solution that keeps jobs in the woods without sacrificing key habitat for deer, bear, wolf and salmon. We support projects that will be compatible with the region’s fishing and tourism industries – as well as deer hunting opportunities - over the long run,” said **SEACC Executive Director Malena Marvin**. “For years, SEACC has worked with regional partners to advocate micro sales, develop community-scale forest projects that support local businesses, and promote the region’s small sawmills,” she continued. “Our organization remains opposed to industrial-scale clearcuts that rely on exports—curtailing the export of round logs to Asia would increase jobs per log cut on the Tongass while eliminating massive, controversial old-growth sales.

“Economic prosperity in Southeast Alaska depends on vibrant, healthy old growth forests to support the economic drivers of our region—world-class fishing, hunting, recreation, and tourism,” said **Holly Harris, Staff Attorney with Earthjustice**. “While Southeast Alaska loses thousands of acres of irreplaceable old growth habitat in sales like Big Thorne, taxpayers are paying tens of millions of dollars a year to prop up the old growth timber industry. The Forest Service’s tired reliance on these kinds of massive, subsidized old growth sales devastates the environment and jeopardizes the future of our region.”

“Allowing massive sales like Big Thorne is yet another blow to the Tongass National Forest and southeast Alaska,” said **Kristen Miller, Conservation Director at Alaska Wilderness League**. “Continuing to subsidize sales like Big Thorne threatens the viability of the wildlife and scenery that bring one million people to hike, hunt, fish, kayak and tour the Tongass each year. Southeast Alaska’s economy has moved on from timber. Instead of continuing to pour money into massive old growth giveaways like Big Thorne, why not put taxpayer dollars where they will give us the largest return on our investment year after year, and allow us to preserve a national treasure in the process.”

"It's clear that the Big Thorne sale is not the best path forward for taxpayers, for local

² See Declaration of Jonathan J. Rhodes, Hydrologist at <http://www.documentcloud.org/documents/781893-exh-300a-rhodes-declaration.html>

communities, or for wildlife," said **Alli Harvey, Alaska Representative for Sierra Club's Our Wild America campaign**. "We should be safeguarding this amazing rainforest and its old growth trees, not clear-cutting the future."

"The Big Thorne timber sale is bad for wildlife, birds, fish and the people who care about them," said **Jim Adams, Audubon Alaska's Policy Director**. "The science tells us it is long-past time for the Forest Service to transition away from large-scale old-growth timber sales on the Tongass."

Appealing the Big Thorne decision are the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council, Alaska Wilderness League, Sierra Club, and Audubon Alaska. Appealing a separate decision related to the Tongass Land Management Plan are Southeast Alaska Conservation Council, Natural Resources Defense Council, Alaska Wilderness League, and Sierra Club. Earthjustice represents the groups in both appeals.