

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Oct. 15, 2019

ALASKA WILDERNESS LEAGUE * AUDUBON ALASKA * CENTER FOR BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY * DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE * EARTHJUSTICE * GEOS INSTITUTE * NATURAL RESOURCES DEFENSE COUNCIL * SIERRA CLUB * SOUTHEAST ALASKA CONSERVATION COUNCIL * THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY * WOMEN'S EARTH AND CLIMATE ACTION NETWORK (WECAN)*

Trump Administration Paves Way for Old-growth Clearcutting in Alaska's Tongass National Forest
Forest Service Proposal Would Gut Protections across 9 Million Acres of America's Largest National Forest

JUNEAU, Alaska -- The Trump administration today announced plans to gut long-standing protections against logging and road-building in the Tongass National Forest, a cherished old-growth temperate rainforest in Southeast Alaska and homelands of the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian people. A coalition that includes Alaska Native people and Alaska-based and national organizations opposes the U.S. Forest Service plan, which comes weeks after revelations that President Trump [exerted pressure](#) to allow new clear-cuts in the Tongass.

The agency's Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS), expected to be published by the end of this week, would repeal Roadless Rule protections across more than 9 million acres of the Tongass, dangerously weakening this national standard by **enabling logging interests to bulldoze roads and clear-cut trees in areas of the Tongass that have been off-limits for decades.**

In Alaska, which experienced unprecedented heat waves this summer, the Tongass serves as a buffer against climate change and as a refuge for salmon, birds and other wildlife. Much like the Amazon rainforest, the Tongass' stands of ancient trees are champions at absorbing greenhouse gas emissions, storing approximately 8 percent of the total carbon in all national forests of the lower 48 states.

Logging the Tongass would threaten the health of Alaskan salmon by polluting rivers and streams, and by removing trees that help regulate water temperature. Current Roadless Rule protections also extend to cultural and sacred sites of great importance to Alaska Native people, who rely upon the Tongass for spiritual and subsistence practices.

The landmark 2001 [Roadless Area Conservation Rule](#) protects more than 58 million acres of roadless national forest lands across the country. Weakening this policy in Alaska will harm local and indigenous communities, Southeast Alaska's economy, salmon fisheries, and wildlife. The Tongass, America's largest and wildest national forest, draws outdoor adventurers, boaters, birders, hunters and anglers. An intact Tongass supports a robust Southeast Alaskan economy through tourism, commercial and sport fishing, and small businesses. Its old-growth trees provide irreplaceable wildlife habitat for myriad species including wild Pacific salmon, Alexander Archipelago wolves, and Sitka black-tailed deer.

More than 1.5 million Americans voiced support for the Roadless Rule during the original rulemaking process, which followed decades of clear-cutting that had a destructive and lasting impact on the Tongass.

The rule continues to receive overwhelming support in Alaska and across the nation. Recent polling shows that 61 percent of voters nationwide oppose exempting large parts of the Tongass from the protections of the Roadless Rule. In Southeast Alaska, 60 percent support keeping the Roadless Rule in place, more than twice as many as those who support a Tongass exemption. Two different polls were conducted; by Tulchin Research and Lake Research.

The following statements were released in response to the announcement:

“We must holistically analyze the root causes of habitat destruction in the Tongass National Forest along with its directed social injustices, while quickly seeking solutions to the very real climate crisis today that is hugely impacting all the life on the lands we depend upon, including ours. We are the voices for the protection of the 2001 ROADLESS RULE. It must be coded into law for its own protection from industrial exploitation,” **said Wanda Culp, Tlingit Activist, Women’s Earth and Climate Action Network (WECAN) Tongass Regional Coordinator**

“The world's largest remaining intact temperate rainforest containing vital old-growth trees is under attack because of efforts to undo the Roadless Rule. The Tongass Rainforest of Alaska—the traditional homelands of the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian Peoples—has been called ‘the nation's climate forest’ due to its unsurpassed ability to sequester carbon and mitigate climate impacts. For decades, industrial-scale logging has been destroying this precious ecosystem and disrupting the lifeways of the region’s Indigenous peoples and local communities. We stand with Indigenous peoples, Southeast Alaskans and allies nationally and internationally to say no to further old-growth logging, and yes to maintaining the current Roadless Rule. Our national forests are essential lungs of the Earth,” **said Osprey Orielle Lake, Executive Director, Women’s Earth and Climate Action Network (WECAN)**

“Relinquishing over nine million acres of protected national forest to feed the mouths of an industry that exports our old-growth forests overseas and provides free roads for mining development is not the future of Alaska for Alaskans,” **said Natalie Dawson, executive director for Audubon Alaska.** “It disregards decades of hard work by Alaskans to protect our remaining forests and salmon-rich waters for sustainable industries that actually exist and rely on healthy, intact forests, and their supported fish, birds, and other wildlife. This is the diversity that will drive the future of Alaska’s economy.”

“The push for an Alaska-specific roadless rule has always been just pretext for continuing to subsidize Southeast Alaska’s old-growth timber industry, and it will do so at the expense of recreation and fishing, Native communities, and wildlife,” **said Andy Moderow, Alaska director at Alaska Wilderness League.** “Moving forward with an Alaska-specific rule is wrong for the Tongass and wrong for Southeast Alaska. There are better ways to ‘meaningfully address local economic and development concerns’ than asking taxpayers to foot the bill for another hefty subsidy to Alaska’s timber industry, like addressing maintenance backlogs and permitting issues that will benefit the region’s booming tourism and

recreation sectors, or stream restoration that will boost Southeast's billion-dollar fishing industry and support the region's wildlife."

"The Tongass National Forest stores more carbon removed from the atmosphere than any other national forest in the country. The Roadless Rule has protected the Tongass rainforest for almost two decades," **said Josh Hicks, roadless defense campaign manager at The Wilderness Society.** "By seeking to weaken the Roadless Rule's protections, the Forest Service is prioritizing one forest use – harmful logging – over mitigating climate change, protecting wildlife habitat, and offering unmatched sight-seeing and recreation opportunities found only in southeast Alaska."

"Efforts to undermine environmental protection for the Tongass National Forest not only put Alaska's last vestiges of old-growth forest at risk, but also clear the way for even bigger attacks on forests nationwide. We cannot allow the Trump administration to log away our future and ignore the risks these rollbacks pose to Alaskan communities, forests and economy," **said Kirin Kennedy, Deputy Legislative Director for lands and wildlife at Sierra Club.**

"This is another Trump Administration attempt to roll back protections for wildlife and hand over public lands to private interests," **said Patrick Lavin, Alaska policy advisor at Defenders of Wildlife.** "The public has [overwhelmingly opposed this effort](#) and made clear that the Forest Service should keep watersheds and habitats supporting sustainable resources like salmon intact, not auction them off to timber companies at taxpayer expense."

"Hundreds of scientists have supported the inclusion of the Tongass National Forest in the National Roadless Conservation Rule due to its extraordinary subsistence wildlife, fisheries, and climate benefits," **said Dominick DellaSala, PhD, president and chief scientist at Geos Institute.** "It is Alaska's first line of climate change defense and deserves full protection under the national Roadless Rule while at the same time the Forest Service implements plans to rapidly transition out of old-growth logging."

"The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) that was released today trades on Southeast Alaskans' vision for our collective future by prolonging and delaying our region's transition away from a remnant timber industry on life support," **said Meredith Trainor, Executive Director of the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council.** "Nothing about the effort to exempt the Tongass National Forest from the National Roadless Rule makes sense for the future of Southeast Alaska. The proposed alternative contemplated in the DEIS threatens fish habitat and the fisheries they support; undermines tourism by damaging the landscapes our visitors come to see; destroys deep, wild, forested habitat relied upon by species other than our own; and lifts up the crown jewel of the National Forest system, the big old growth trees of the Tongass National Forest, and asserts that they are worth only as much as the lowest bidder is willing to pay."

"President Trump's attack on the Tongass National Forest threatens an irreplaceable national treasure," **said Eric Jorgensen, Earthjustice managing attorney in Juneau.** "The millions of ancient trees across this temperate rainforest serve as the greatest carbon sanctuary in the U.S. national forest system, helping us all as a counterweight against the climate crisis. This ecologically rich landscape and critical wildlife habitat will be lost forever if industry is allowed to clear-cut our national forest. There is no good reason

to roll back protections for the Tongass, and Earthjustice will oppose this attack on the safeguards wisely established by the Roadless Rule.”

“As a global climate crisis demands that we take urgent conservation and climate-mitigation measures, the Trump administration wants to do the opposite—and lay waste to some of our country’s most unspoiled wildlands that absorb massive amounts of carbon,” **said Niel Lawrence, Alaska director for the Natural Resources Defense Council.** “For nearly two decades, the Roadless Rule has successfully shielded these magnificent natural resources, and we won’t allow the Trump Administration to destroy the rule—or that progress—in another taxpayer-subsidized handout to its friends in industry.”

“Alaska’s elected officials are selling out their constituents and robbing future generations by trying to strip protections from one of the most pristine old-growth forests in the world,” said **Randi Spivak, public lands director at the Center for Biological Diversity.** “Alaska is already reeling from the effects of climate change. Clearcutting remaining old-growth trees in the Tongass National Forest would release significant amounts of carbon into the atmosphere and make things worse. This disastrous plan would smother vital wild salmon streams with sediment and irreparably harm subsistence hunters. It’s wrong to put private profits ahead of the health and future of Alaskans.”

CONTACTS:

Andy Moderow, Alaska Wilderness League, 907-360-3622, andy@alaskawild.org

Rebecca Sentner, Audubon Alaska, 907-276-7034, rsentner@audubon.org

Meredith Trainor, Southeast Alaska Conservation Council, 907-957-8347, Meredith@seacc.org

Gabby Brown, Sierra Club, 914-261-4626, gabby.brown@sierraclub.org

Jake Bleich, Defenders of Wildlife, 202-772-3208, jbleich@defenders.org

Rebecca Bowe, Earthjustice, 415-217-2093, rbowe@earthjustice.org

Katherine Quaid, WECAN International, 541-325-1058, katherine@wecaninternational.org

Anne Hawke, Natural Resources Defense Council, 646-823-4518, ahawke@nrdc.org

Randi Spivak, Center for Biological Diversity, 310-779-4894, rspivak@biologicaldiversity.org

###