

# USDA moves to restore Tongass protections, undoing Trump changes

By Michael Doyle

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The to-and-fro over Alaska's Tongass National Forest took its latest turn today, as the Agriculture Department announced plans to restore protections on millions of acres left exposed by the Trump administration.

In a highly anticipated move, USDA said it will start the process to repeal a 2020 rule that effectively opened to road construction and logging more than 9 million acres of the Tongass.

The Trump administration's Alaska Roadless Rule, approved Oct. 29, 2020, exempted the Tongass from a nationwide 2001 regulation that with some exceptions prohibited road construction, reconstruction and timber harvest in inventoried roadless areas.

"Restoring the Tongass' roadless protections supports the advancement of economic, ecologic and cultural sustainability in Southeast Alaska in a manner that is guided by local voices," Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said in a statement today.

Vilsack added that the proposed rule, which will be open for public comment following its formal publication early next week, is "considerate of Alaska's Tribal Nations, community input, and builds on the region's economic drivers of tourism and fishing."

The agency noted that more than 95 percent of comments opposed exempting the Tongass from the 2001 Roadless Rule during the public comment periods leading up to the Trump administration's action last October.

"It would be difficult to overstate how flawed the Trump administration's rulemaking process was that ultimately stripped roadless protections from the Tongass despite widespread opposition in Southeast Alaska and the public," said Andy Moderow, Alaska director of the Alaska Wilderness League.

The Biden administration had signaled its intentions for the Tongass last June, as part of a larger plan for reversing Trump-era regulations, prompting an outcry from Alaska lawmakers that they are likely to echo today ([Greenwire](#), June 11).

"Repealing the Tongass exemption from the 2001 Roadless Rule is wrong," Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska) said earlier this year. "It will cost jobs, diminish income, keep energy prices high and cripple the ability of the communities in the region to develop a sustainable, year-round economy."

Alaska's lone House member, Republican Rep. Don Young, added that "Washington, D.C., bureaucrats who live and work 4,000 miles away have made a terrible decision for Alaska, and have shown a terrible disregard for our people."

## A long and winding road

The Tongass — about the size of West Virginia — is the largest national forest in the United States.

The Trump administration's rule lifted road-building restrictions on 9.4 million acres of the Tongass' nearly 17 million acres.

Environmental groups that sought to reinstate protections cite the forest's unmatched ability to sequester carbon, as well as its unusual status as a large temperate rainforest that's home to bountiful wildlife.

“The Biden administration’s announcement ... marks a critical inflection point in the long history of the fight to protect the Tongass National Forest,” said Meredith Trainor, executive director of the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council, adding that “we need both Alaskans and Americans across the country to show up once more to speak out on behalf of our forest.”

Timber harvesting advocates counter that most of the Tongass would have remained off-limits under the Trump-era rule, through both wilderness-area protections and the Tongass land management plan that sets policies and timber harvesting targets.

The 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule has been the subject of much litigation and ensuing uncertainty. Its application to the Tongass was briefly lifted during the George W. Bush's administration but was put back in place following legal challenges.

“The Tongass National Forest has endured debate regarding land and natural resource management for decades,” the Trump administration noted last year, with considerable understatement.

The Trump administration further declared that although it was exempting 9.4 million acres from road-building restrictions, other management considerations meant that “only 186,000 acres would become eligible for timber production.”

The state of Alaska had petitioned the Trump administration to exempt both the Tongass and the Chugach National Forest. Trump’s USDA left the roadless rule in place for the Chugach, which produces less timber.

The Biden administration previously announced in July that it was ending large-scale timber sales on the Tongass, with management priorities turning toward conservation ([Greenwire](#), July 15).

The July announcement was accompanied by \$25 million in assistance and what USDA called a new strategy to “help advance economic, ecologic, and cultural sustainability in Southeast Alaska in a manner that is directed by local voices and which builds on the region’s private-sector economic drivers of tourism, fishing, and recreation.”

A 60-day comment period will begin Tuesday with the publication in the *Federal Register* of the proposal to repeal the 2020 Alaska Roadless Rule.