

Comments pour in on renewed Tongass roadless restrictions

By Marc Heller

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Opponents and supporters of timber development in roadless areas of the Tongass National Forest submitted thousands of comments to the Forest Service ahead of a Monday deadline on reinstating restrictions.

The flood of submissions reflects the well-established battle lines over the Roadless Area Conservation Rule, as the Biden administration moves to reverse Trump-era proclivity for development in the Tongass, the country's biggest national forest.

"Reversing the Roadless Rule exemption offers the best chance for protecting the last remaining large stands of old-growth forest in our nation," said Mike Taylor, mayor of Gustavus, Alaska, in comments submitted with a copy of a City Council-passed resolution supporting the restrictions.

"Old-growth trees are more than just pretty, ancient, and awe-inspiring," Taylor said. "At no cost to taxpayers (unlike the subsidized clearcut logging that has characterized the Tongass National Forest's management for decades), the Tongass 24/7 provides ecosystem services — clean water, clean air, fish and animal habitat, etc. — that are a major contribution to the health of our region."

The Alaska Wilderness League and other groups said in a joint statement that reinstating roadless-area limits on development "will help to mitigate the growing impacts of our dual climate and biodiversity crises by preserving a natural climate solution that benefits communities around the globe and protecting imperiled species that rely upon Roadless areas for survival."

At nearly 17 million acres, the Tongass is one of the last intact temperate rainforests and a significant carbon sink, according to researchers. But it also supports a wood products industry in southeast Alaska that, while shrinking, remains an economic and political force.

The roadless area rule affects slightly more than 9 million acres, but the area wouldn't all be logged with a repeal of the rule. Lifting the restrictions would allow the Forest Service to consider areas within the boundaries on a case-by-case basis over a period of many years.

Other forest industries such as hydroelectric power and mining depend on access to the Tongass, say economic development groups and many of the state's political leaders, including Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski and other members of the congressional delegation.

"Southeast Alaska deserves a sustainable economy, but the one-size-fits-all Roadless Rule works against that," said Murkowski, Sen. Dan Sullivan (R-Alaska) and the state's longtime sole House member, Republican Rep. Don Young, in a statement Monday.

"It should never have been applied to Alaska, and it should not be re-applied this year or any other," the lawmakers said. "For the sake of everything from transportation access to renewable energy, we remain united in our support for the Roadless Rule exemption finalized in 2020, and opposed to this effort to once again force unnecessary, sweeping restrictions upon millions of acres of the Tongass."

Lawmakers not from Alaska, mainly Democrats, have jumped on the issue from the opposite side.

Rep. Ruben Gallego (D-Ariz.), Sen. Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.) and 70 other lawmakers [wrote](#) to the Department of Agriculture earlier this week supporting the administration's moves, which also include directing funds toward other types of development in the state.

The administration's proposal "rightfully refocuses agency resources on higher-value restoration and recreation initiatives over historically wasteful and destructive logging projects," they said.

The *Federal Register* reported more than 20,000 comments received as of Jan. 5, but the conservation groups said more than 170,000 comments were submitted Monday supporting roadless area protections, reflecting the coordinated effort of the rule's supporters. Many submissions are form letters, or letters written at the urging of interest groups.

In addition to those comments, many Alaska Native tribal governments in the region support limits on road development, pointing to salmon fishing and deer-hunting as more important to their livelihoods.

If this round of comments resembles past rounds during the Trump administration, a large majority of submissions will support keeping restrictions in place.

But the previous administration sided with economic considerations, saying certain areas could be opened for potential logging without harming the environment. Then-Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue granted the exemption at the request of the state of Alaska ([Greenwire](#), Oct. 28, 2020).

The Biden administration quickly moved to undo that action, following an executive order directing agencies to review Trump administration policies that could harm the environment.

"The Tongass, along with adjacent areas in Canada, represents the largest intact tract of coastal temperate rainforest on earth, and it contains nearly a third of all old-growth temperate rainforests left in the world," the Department of Agriculture said in the new proposed rule last November. "This ecosystem is nationally and globally significant for its ability to sequester carbon in support of a resilient climate and is seen as a critical resource to retain intact in our changing climate."

The Biden administration has said it aims to issue a final rule in November.