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Comments:

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Dear Tongass Forest Planners:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Tongass Roadless Rule Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

I have lived in the Tongass National Forest (Sitka, Juneau, and Tenakee Springs) for over 50 years. Throughout this time I have been very involved with outdoors activities throughout the Tongass, from Dixon Entrance to Icy Strait.

I am a subsistence hunter, fisherman, berry picker, and edible plant gatherer. I am also a boater, hiker, camper, and kayaker; an avid wildlife watcher, photographer, and natural sounds recordist. Professionally I have been a professional writer and producer of a Public Radio program about the natural environment.

Making the Tongass National Forest my home is the greatest privilege in my life, and participating in Tongass management is among my most important responsibilities as a citizen in our democracy. I am profoundly grateful for the processes that allow citizens like me to have a voice in the uses of the Tongass and our great heritage of National Public Lands.

One of the happiest occasions in my decades as a Southeast Alaska resident was the inclusion of the Tongass National Forest under the Roadless Rule. It meant, at long last, that Tongass management assumed a fully modern form, by treating the largest and richest and most extraordinary National Forest on an equal basis with all the other components of our National Forest system.

Removing the Tongass from Roadless Rule protections would be a huge and consequential step backwards. Clearly this exemption is intended to encourage further industrial clearcut logging in a forest that has already seen widespread and highly consequential damage from many decades of intensive timber harvest.

During those earlier decades, we learned that large scale timber harvest created huge stands of early stage regrowth, with massive thickets of scrub and slash, and then monotype second growth forest with an impoverished understory. Countless times, I have fought my way through recently clearcut tracts, and I know from experience that they are virtually impenetrable wastelands.

More importantly, extensive research has shown that second growth in the Tongass is poor habitat for black-tailed deer, which are by far the most significant subsistence game in Southeast Alaska. The economic value of deer to literally thousands of households in Southeast Alaska must be factored into any calculation of the impact of roads and industrial logging.

Even more consequential from an economic standpoint is the loss of forest cover in Southeast Alaska drainages and stream courses, plus erosion and sediment runoff from timber harvest, which have seriously degraded salmon spawning habitat.

Taken together, timber harvesting and the associated road system have had very serious negative impacts on subsistence and sport hunting; on commercial, sport, and subsistence fishing; on a wide range of tourism and recreation activities; and on the inshore waters that are important nursery areas for commercially valuable saltwater fish such as black cod and rockfish.

In Southeast Alaska, there is a remarkable synergy among whole spectrum of economic activities-commercial fishing, subsistence, tourism, and recreation. Each of these activities contributes importantly and harmoniously to the economy, culture, and way of life in our communities.

Only one resource-based industry detracts from all the others--large scale commercial timber harvesting. Unfortunately, the timber industry as it has been carried out stands apart from all others as a significant negative for the life and life ways of Southeast Alaska communities.

Over many decades, timber harvests and road networks have had a profound cumulative effect on the ecological integrity of Southeast Alaska's temperate rainforest. Stakeholders have been told that each logging operation will take only a small amount of timber, but little by little the forest has been carved apart, jigsaw fashion. In addition, the most ecologically important parts of the forest-old growth-have been targeted..

What we've seen in many parts of the Tongass National Forest is literally a case of death by a thousand cuts.

The truth is, our forests are incomparably more valuable, ecologically and economically, when the trees are left on the mountainsides and in the valleys.

As a longtime resident of Sitka, I can attest to the powerfully negative impacts of the timber industry during the pulp mill era, when our community was divided over the issue of timber harvest. In the time since closure of the Alaska Pulp Company's Sitka mill, the quality of life and the social integrity of our community has improved profoundly.

Sitka today is an utterly different and incomparably more desirable place to live in, compared to the "pulp mill days". The economy is strong and diversified, our connections with the natural environment are more vital and valuable than ever, and we live in an atmosphere of compatibility that has grown since the mill closed..

What I am saying is that opening the Tongass National Forest to more road building, and the consequent increases of old growth timber harvesting, would bring incomparably more harm than good to Southeast Alaska.

We already have literally thousands of miles of roads in the Tongass, mostly constructed for the purpose of timber harvest. As second growth forest reaches harvestable age, we can utilize this vast network of roads to access those young trees. We need to shape any future wood-based industry in Southeast Alaska around harvesting the second growth trees, and for this we can for the most part utilize the pre-existing network of roads.

This applies around my home town of Sitka, as it does around most other communities in Southeast Alaska. Today I know better than to attempt bush hiking or hunting in places like Rodman Bay or central Kruzof Island. These areas are lost to us for virtually any use, until old growth conditions return, which may take centuries, or second growth harvest becomes possible..

We have a big challenge to actively restore the salmon spawning streams that were damaged by earlier logging operations. Instead of putting taxpayers money into building new roads, allowing a new round of destructive timber harvest, it makes far greater sense to fund the restoration of our salmon streams.

We now recognize that fish-not timber-are the most important renewable resource provided by the Tongass National Forest.

The same is true for our large and growing tourism and recreation industries, which thrive on the spectacular, pristine nature of our environment and can only be damaged by any future logging and associated road building. To some extent, pre-existing roads can benefit access for tourists, but having guided tourists on such roads I know that few are impressed by the shrub thickets and dog hair conifers.

Hundreds of thousands of tourists visit Southeast Alaska each year, and what truly inspires them are the uncut forests of enormous ancient trees.

In conclusion, I strongly support the NO CHANGE option which maintains roadless areas in the Tongass, following the same regulatory regime as that of other National Forests. Removing the Tongass from Roadless Rule protections would have an overall negative effect on Southeast Alaska's communities, ways of life, and economy.

If anything, I would urge further strengthening of Roadless Rule protections, for the benefits that such a management policy would bring to Southeast Alaska.

Maintaining the Tongass under the umbrella of Roadless Rule management will greatly help toward keeping this National Forest one of the most spectacular and valuable places within our entire system of National Public Lands. These public lands are one of the greatest achievements of American democracy, attracting people from all over the world, contributing to our healthy and vital economy, and sustaining one of the most extraordinary ways of life anywhere in our nation.

Thank you for taking the time to read this comment.

Sincerely,
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