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Comments:

Image without a caption Congress has designated another 5.7 million acres of the forest as wilderness, which must remain off limits to such activities under any circumstances. Tongass, which lies in southeast Alaska, is home to massive old-growth stands and provides habitat for a range of wildlife. Roughly 40 percent of wild salmon that swim along the West Coast spawn in the Tongass, generating a fishery that the Forest Service estimates is worth \$986 million a year. The agency said in a statement that the Tongass which ranks as the single largest holding in the federal forest system covers 80 percent of the land along the 500-mile Southeast Alaska Panhandle. It is rich in natural resources and cultural heritage, the statement said. While President George W. Bush sought to reverse Clintons roadless policy in the Tongass in 2003, a federal judge reinstated it in 2011, and the decision was upheld on appeal. AD

In a statement, Forest Service officials said the new plan which lists five alternatives including greater restrictions on logging will be subject to public comment for 60 days. Those comments will inform the department as Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue moves toward a final decision, an official added. But Trump, who has spoken with Alaska Gov. Michael J. Dunleavy (R) multiple times on the subject, has asked Perdue to exempt the Tongass from logging limits, according to several federal officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss private deliberations. On Tuesday, Dunleavy hailed the decision as further proof that Alaskas economic outlook is looking brighter every day. Alaskas entire congressional delegation, which is all Republican members, has also asked Trump to expand development in the Tongass. While the Forest Service has approved at least 55 projects in roadless areas, including 36 for mining and 10 related to the power sector, lawmakers said that permitting had imposed unnecessary delays. AD

As Alaskans know well, the Roadless Rule hinders our ability to responsibly harvest timber, develop minerals, connect communities, or build energy projects to lower costs including renewable energy projects like hydropower, all of which severely impedes the economy of Southeast, said Sen. Dan Sullivan (R-Alaska) in a statement. Timber provides a small portion of southeastern Alaskas jobs just under 1 percent compared with seafood processings 8 percent and tourisms 17 percent, according to Southeast Conference, a regional development group. Keegan McCarthy, owner and operator of a hunting, guiding and luxury charter business in the Tongass, said in a phone interview that federal officials are ignoring local businesses like his that depend on its wild habitat. Theyre just railroading this idea that we need full-scale logging back on the Tongass National Forest, he said, noting that he employs 20 people from small towns in the region. AD

McCarthy added that Perdue had assured him and others earlier this year that many of the protections would probably remain in place, but then reversed course after Dunleavy and Trump discussed the matter aboard Air Force One during a refueling stop at Elmendorf Air Force Base. Eric Jorgensen, managing attorney in the Juneau office of the environmental law firm Earthjustice, said in a phone interview that his group would challenge the move, and that he was confident it would prevail because previous courts had affirmed the 2001 policy. The bottom line is the agency will face a heavy burden to justify this exemption, Jorgensen said. President Trumps attack on the Tongass National Forest threatens an irreplaceable national treasure. Jorgensen noted that the administration could not finalize its plan until next year, and that it would be difficult to hold a timber sale in the protected area before the end of Trumps first term because the Forest Service would have to conduct an environmental analysis of any new auction as well as revamp its existing management plan for the Tongass. AD

Robert Venables, executive director of Southeast Conference, said in an email that critics of the plan were exaggerating its potential impact. The vast millions of acres of the Tongass will still never see a road or miss a tree, he said, adding that he hoped the new proposal would lead to a long-term sustainable plan for managing all of the Tongass resources. Still, scientists who have worked in the area say the road building that would be required to take out more timber could fragment critical habitat, and logging could remove trees that trap sediment and keep waterways cool. They went to the easy places first. Now theyre going to have to build roads to get to the next round of timber, Forest Service emeritus scientist Gordon Reeves, who worked as a research scientist in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska for 35 years, said in a recent interview. You put the roads in, and that tends to change everything. AD

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