

State leads new efforts to restore Roadless Rule exemption

By Elizabeth Jenkins, Alaska's Energy Desk | January 26, 2018



Alaska's Energy Desk , Economy , Southeast , Timber

2018 Alaska State of the State Address



There have been numerous attempts recently to sidestep U.S. Forest Service management of the Tongass National Forest. Sen. Lisa Murkowski has [a few plans in the works](#).

And now the State of Alaska is petitioning for more attention to be given to a very old debate. The Roadless Rule was created to protect wilder areas on federal lands.

But critics say it [limits access to timber](#) and mining in Southeast — putting jobs at risk.

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“Today, my administration filed a petition with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to undertake a rule making process to restore the Roadless Rule exemption to the region,” the Governor said.

Which could give Alaska a pass to build new roads in the Tongass. And that’s only the latest effort to increase access to logging.

Even by a state forester’s standards, there’s been [a lot to follow](#).

“It’s very complicated,” said Chris Maisch, a director at the Alaska Division of Forestry. “You could do a half hour interview just on the history of this.”

He says the state is asking the the U.S. Department of Agriculture to open up the issue for more public discussion on the Roadless Rule. If approved, Maisch estimates it’s a process that could two years or longer.

And while this tactic might be different than [what it’s tried before](#), he says the ask isn’t anything new.

Maisch says there’s a legal and economic argument to be made: Alaska should be exempt from the Roadless Rule.

“Well, the state has always had the position and has never wavered from that,” Maisch said.

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The U.S. Forest Service has focused its efforts to areas not subject to Roadless Rule, such as the Big Thorne Timber Sale on Prince of Wales Island. (Photo by Elizabeth Jenkins/Alaska's Energy Desk)

But Austin Williams, a director of law and policy at Trout Unlimited, thinks the state's petition could "turn back the clock."

"And really undo a lot of the good work that has been done over the last several years," Williams said.

Sticking with the current forest service plan for the Tongass, Williams said, makes the most sense. It was created with years of community input, and finalized in 2016 — outlining a transition away from cutting old growth trees.

Williams said [the economy in the region has shifted](#) to industries like tourism and fishing. He asserts that rehashing the Roadless Rule debate isn't a step moving forward.

But he says more public discussion is better than some of Sen. Lisa Murkowski's latest efforts on the Tongass.

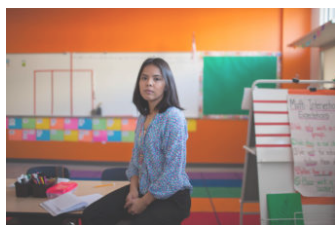
that could exempt Alaska from the Roadless Rule.

Congress has until Feb. 8 to agree on a budget.

In the meantime, the State Division of Forestry is keeping its fingers crossed that one of those efforts sticks.



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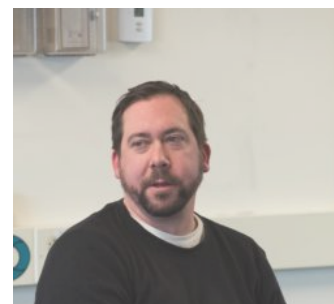
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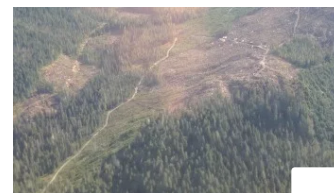
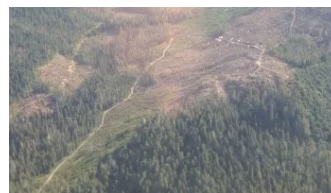
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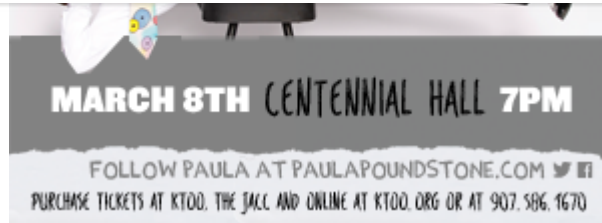
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