



Designed, tested, adapted  
in New Zealand. Since 1987.



# Lisa Murkowski, the #1 Anti-Public Land Lawmaker

The Alaska senator is gambling with America's most pristine lands—and winning



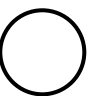
Jake Bullinger  
(/2238636/jake-bullinger)

Feb 7, 2018





**A**s chair of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, Alaska's Republican Senator Lisa Murkowski often fights with U.S. Forest Service brass over management of the Tongass National Forest. She believes federal regulations are to blame for the lumber industry's decline. In a 2015 hearing (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qWpcDxGMExo>),



Murkowski grilled then-Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell about offering up more of the 17-million acre forest to timber companies. Tidwell, who retired in August 2017, explained that his agency had already increased its timber leases by one-third over a six-year stretch.

“Are we talking the Tongass?” Murkowski asked.

Not specifically, Tidwell responded.

“I want to talk the Tongass,” Murkowski said. “Because this is my state’s—or *used* to be my state’s—economy.”

Three years later, Murkowski is still talking the Tongass. And as Congress faces another budget deal showdown this week (and a possible shutdown), Murkowski is hoping to slide in her own special request. Her draft bill

(<https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FY2018-INT-CHAIRMEN-MARK-BILL.PDF>) to fund the Forest Service would, among other things, nix an Obama-era plan to phase out old-growth logging there and would exempt Alaska from the so-called roadless rule, which could open 9.3 million acres of the largest temperate rainforest

(<http://ak.audubon.org/conservation/tongass-national-forest>) in the world to the lumber industry.

**“Extraction is her top priority, whether it’s drilling, fracking, or logging. She’s not looking at what’s really good for the future of Alaska.”**

Murkowski’s effort to boost Tongass logging follows her successful bid to open the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) to oil drilling, which was folded into last year’s GOP-led tax cut. Environmentalists fear that both measures will sacrifice the rarest ecosystems of our public lands for dubious economic trade-offs, especially because the Tongass deal would largely benefit just a few hundred people in the area’s timber industry and ANWR doubles down on Alaska’s dependence on oil ([http://www.iser.uaa.alaska.edu/Publications/2016\\_11-WhatHappenedtotheAKEconomySinceOilPricesDropped.pdf](http://www.iser.uaa.alaska.edu/Publications/2016_11-WhatHappenedtotheAKEconomySinceOilPricesDropped.pdf)).



While other lawmakers have gotten more attention for public-land policies—Murkowski’s Senate colleague Orrin Hatch, for instance, orchestrated the reduction of two Utah national monuments—Murkowski introduced 11 bills in 2017 that are aimed at eroding public land protections, the most of any lawmaker.

“Murkowski, she’s old school,” says Randi Spivak, public lands director at the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental nonprofit based in Tucson, Arizona. “Extraction is her top priority, whether it’s drilling, fracking, or logging. She’s not looking at what’s really good for the future of Alaska.”

When the ANWR provision was signed into law, Murkowski was ebullient. During a congratulatory press conference, she explained to President Donald Trump: “This, Mr. President, is what energy dominance is all about.” The next day, Murkowski took to the morning shows in her home state. “What this allows us as Alaskans is an opportunity for resource, for revenues, for jobs,” she told (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KpDcITmlN6Y>) Alaska television station KTVA. (Murkowski declined to speak to *Outside*.)

The impetus to allow drilling in the 1002 area, the only section of ANWR available for oil exploration, is clear: Alaska’s revenue structure is almost wholly dependent on oil royalties. The urgency for new revenue has also been ratcheting up, especially now that production in oil fields in the North Slope is a quarter of the 1980s peak and crude prices are mired below \$65 a barrel. Alaska has faced budget shortfalls in recent years, and Governor Bill Walker even proposed an income tax. But market forces, the fossil fuel-loving Trump administration, and the funding bill gave Murkowski a rare opening to free up ANWR.

“It’s a plus for her politically—it will help her get reelected,” says Matthew Berman, an economics professor at the University of Alaska Anchorage. “In terms of the state economy, though, it’s somewhat beneficial, but there’s a big danger that the benefits will be oversold.”

Expectations are huge, but nobody is certain how much oil lies beneath ANWR’s coastal plain. The latest guess from the U.S. Geological Survey is that, excluding state and Native lands, the 1002 area holds between 4.3 billion and 11.8 billion (<https://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/fs-0028-01/fs-0028-01.htm>) barrels of recoverable oil—figures based on data from the 1980s. It will also take a while before ANWR drilling starts to line Alaska’s coffers. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that lease sales would generate \$2.2 billion over a decade, then, according to USGS estimates, 2.6 billion barrels would be extracted over another dozen years. At current oil prices, that would net about \$28 billion to be split 50-50 by the federal government and Alaska.

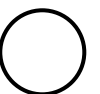


The returns will be slow, while the potential damage caused by drilling could be permanent. The 9,000 or so indigenous people who live in Gwich'in villages to the south and east of ANWR lead a subsistence lifestyle that depends on the porcupine caribou, a 197,000-strong herd that calves in the 1002 area. "If there is destruction to this special place, this is the end of our people," says Bernadette Demientieff, leader of the Gwich'in Steering Community, which was formed in 1988 to oppose development in ANWR. "The porcupine caribou herd is our identity, and our identity is not up for negotiation."

As for the economics, old-growth logging in Tongass makes far less sense than drilling in ANWR. The local timber industry relies on cutting virgin stands of timber, a practice that's virtually nonexistent elsewhere in the United States and Canada. And the owners of the largest remaining mill, Kirk and Bryce Dahlstrom, have repeatedly said (<https://www.ktoo.org/2017/12/05/tongass-transition-uncertain-future-alaskas-last-big-mill/>) their business can't adapt quickly enough to meet the 15-year timeframe imposed by a 2016 plan that requires them to log only younger, smaller trees. (Neither Dahlstrom responded to multiple requests for comment.) In developing that plan, the Forest Service surveyed 75,000 acres in Tongass to determine when second-growth stands—those that grow in areas already logged—would be ready for harvest. But Murkowski seems to think she can delay the industry's demise by quadrupling the surveyed acreage, a move critics call a tactic aimed at stalling the plan's implementation.

## **"Southeast Alaska has evolved."**

Murkowski's 2015 assessment of a waning Alaska timber industry was accurate: More than 3,500 people held logging ([https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE\\_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5349373.pdf](https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5349373.pdf)) jobs in Southeast Alaska in 1990, but that number has shriveled to around 200, according to Robert Venables, president of the Southeast Conference ([http://www.seconference.org/sites/default/files/SEBTN%202015%20Final\\_o.pdf](http://www.seconference.org/sites/default/files/SEBTN%202015%20Final_o.pdf)) economic development group. "It's a mere shadow of its former self," he says. The timber industry, meanwhile, says it needs access to old growth to survive. But the risk of losing forests in Tongass to hold off the death of the timber industry is quickly losing support (<http://juneauempire.com/opinion/2016-04-06/my-turn-economic-reality-alaskas-timber-industry>) in Alaska.



Timber now accounts for just 0.8 percent of wages in Southeast Alaska. But the area's seafood industry now accounts for 12 percent of wages, tourism is 9 percent, and both are growing fast. Take that into account, plus the fact that timber jobs in Southeast Alaska are subsidized by taxpayers to the tune of \$21.7 million each year (<https://www.taxpayer.net/article/money-losing-timber-sales-tongass-national-forest/>), and a lot of Alaskans believe it's time their state moved beyond logging.

"Southeast Alaska has evolved," Keegan McCarthy, a commercial fisherman and owner of a small cruise line, told Alaska Public Media (<https://www.ktoo.org/2017/11/08/plea-dc-save-tongass-plan/>) in November. "We've evolved into a great tourist destination. Commercial fisheries are flourishing. We have amazing other opportunities in Southeast Alaska right now."

Murkowski has found a lot of success this year, but has done so by slipping massive and long-fought environmental battles into legislation that either didn't require a full vote (like with ANWR) or put it inside a government funding package, when all the focus is on other issues. That leaves voters, even some of Murkowski's own constituents, feeling frustrated and unheard.

"She has to understand that she's our senator also, and she has to support and encourage our ways of life," says Demientieff, from the Gwich'in Steering Community. "We've been here for [thousands of] years, and you just come in and are making changes without our input. That's not leadership. That's bullying."

Correction: (Feb 13, 2018) An earlier version of this story misspelled the last name of Kirk and Bryce Dahlstrom. We regret the error.

**Filed To:** [Alaska \(/category/alaska\)](/category/alaska) / [Public Lands \(/category/public-lands\)](/category/public-lands) / [Arizona \(/category/arizona\)](/category/arizona) / [Canada \(/category/canada\)](/category/canada) / [Donald Trump \(/category/donald-trump\)](/category/donald-trump) / [Exploration \(/category/exploration\)](/category/exploration) / [Anchorage \(/category/anchorage\)](/category/anchorage) / [Media \(/category/media\)](/category/media)

**Stay on Topic**

