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SENATOR MURKOWSKI

## Turning Back the Clock on Protecting Alaska's Wild Lands



A view of the Tongass National Forest in Southeast Alaska.  
Wolfgang Kaehler/LightRocket, via Getty Images

By Mike Dombeck March 13, 2018

Efforts to dismantle longstanding protections for Alaska's wild landscapes continue. The latest, by Alaska's senior Republican senator, [Lisa Murkowski](https://www.murkowski.senate.gov/) (<https://www.murkowski.senate.gov/>), would deprive nearly 15 million acres of mostly pristine national forest lands of coverage by a [2001 rule](https://www.fs.usda.gov/roadmain/roadless/home) (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/roadmain/roadless/home>) that prohibits road construction and commercial logging on those tracts.

Should she fail, Alaska is seeking to erect a backstop to accomplish her goal administratively. The state recently asked the Department of Agriculture, which runs the United States Forest Service, the agency I once oversaw, [to exempt](https://www.alaskapublic.org/2018/01/26/state-leads-new-efforts-to-restore-roadless-rule-exemption/) (<https://www.alaskapublic.org/2018/01/26/state-leads-new-efforts-to-restore-roadless-rule-exemption/>), the [Tongass National Forest](https://www.alaskapublic.org/2018/01/26/state-leads-new-efforts-to-restore-roadless-rule-exemption/) (<https://www.alaskapublic.org/2018/01/26/state-leads-new-efforts-to-restore-roadless-rule-exemption/>) from the 2001 regulation, the Roadless Area Conservation Rule.

This is bad not only for Alaska's forests but for the state's economy and American taxpayers, who will end up subsidizing, through road building, the exploitation of these landscapes. Twenty-five percent of [all the salmon caught](https://static01.nyt.com/files/2018/op-ed/Tongass-Salmon-fact-sheet.pdf) (<https://static01.nyt.com/files/2018/op-ed/Tongass-Salmon-fact-sheet.pdf>) on the West Coast come from streams on the Tongass. Maintaining healthy salmon runs should be the priority for the future management of the Tongass. Clearcutting old-growth trees represents the past.

The principal target of Senator Murkowski's efforts, [contained in proposals](https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/news/majority/fy2018-interior-environment-appropriations-bill-released) (<https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/news/majority/fy2018-interior-environment-appropriations-bill-released>) for inclusion in appropriations legislation making its way through Congress, is the Tongass, the nation's largest national forest, 16.7 million acres of mostly wild land along the Inside Passage of Alaska's southeastern coast. About 9.5 million acres is classified as roadless

under the 2001 rule. Alaska's other national forest, [the Chugach](https://www.fs.usda.gov/chugach/) (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/chugach/>), has about 5.4 million acres of roadless lands that would also be opened to road building.

The Tongass is a magnificent place. The Forest Service itself describes it this way: "Comprising the largest intact temperate rain forest in the world, the Tongass is a place filled with islands and salmon streams, where towering mountains sweep down into thick old-growth forest and granite cliffs drop into deep fjords."

During the later part of the last century, stands of trees 200 to 500 years old were routinely clear-cut in Alaska's national forests — especially in the Tongass. Federal subsidies for roads and bridges made the cutting profitable for industry, and most of the wood was exported to Asia.

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By the 1990s, both tourists and Alaskans were outraged by the unsightly scars. [Prince of Wales Island](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/28/us/a-battle-to-keep-trees-or-an-industry-standing.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/28/us/a-battle-to-keep-trees-or-an-industry-standing.html>) became a symbol of the damage caused by large-scale clear cutting of old-growth forests. Multiple lawsuits sought to block the liquidation of Alaska's old-growth forests.

Further protections for the Tongass were added in 2016, when a management plan was finalized after years of analysis and input from the public and affected interests. It provides for moving away from cutting old-growth forests while maintaining a sustainable level of harvesting of second-growth forest on already cut land. An advisory group known as the [Tongass Transition Collaborative](http://www.merid.org/tongassimplementation.aspx) (<http://www.merid.org/tongassimplementation.aspx>) — made up of representatives from the timber, fishing and recreation industries and local communities — continues to advise the forest service on the management of the Tongass.

Senator Murkowski seeks to undo that plan, too. Another section of the appropriations proposal would weaken protections for old-growth forests and fish and wildlife in the Tongass.

In [remarks prepared for delivery](https://www.murkowski.senate.gov/press/speech/speech-2018-address-to-alaska-state-legislature)

(<https://www.murkowski.senate.gov/press/speech/speech-2018-address-to-alaska-state-legislature>) to the Alaska Legislature last month, Senator Murkowski argued that "federal restrictions, including the roadless rule, are holding back timber, mining and renewable energy development." She added, "I believe there is room and need for all of those alongside tourism and fisheries in a sustainable Southeast economy, and that is why I am pushing hard to restore balanced management."

Critics of the roadless rule are wrong when they claim it blocks mining and renewable energy projects. The 1872 Mining Law guarantees reasonable and necessary access to explore and develop mineral claims in roadless areas, while the Federal Power Act allows for the construction of hydroelectric projects in roadless areas. The [Forest Service reports](https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd495343.pdf) ([https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE\\_DOCUMENTS/fseprd495343.pdf](https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd495343.pdf)) that as of January it had approved 55 projects in roadless areas in Alaska, including 36 mining and 10 hydro or hydro-related projects, most winning approval within a month.

The days of litigation and controversy should be behind us. The regulation that protects roadless areas is more than 16 years old and has withstood multiple legal challenges. The roadless rule is an intensely conservative regulation. It saves taxpayers money and keeps our few remaining wild remote public lands intact. Most important, it maintains options for future generations.

The Tongass includes some of the most productive and valuable fish and wildlife habitat in the world. A [report by Southeast Conference](http://www.seconference.org/southeast-alaska-numbers) (<http://www.seconference.org/southeast-alaska-numbers>), a regional economic development organization, shows that Southeast Alaska's tourism industry supports 17 percent of all jobs while the seafood industry, mostly commercial fishing for salmon, accounts for 9 percent of jobs. The Tongass National Forest makes up 78 percent of the land base in Southeast Alaska and is the mainstay of the region's economy.

The targeting of the Tongass is the latest in Senator Murkowski's efforts to turn back longstanding protections of wild places in Alaska. She championed [the lifting late last year](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/20/climate/drilling-arctic-anwr.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/20/climate/drilling-arctic-anwr.html>) of a decades-old ban on oil and gas drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in northeastern Alaska, as well as a [land swap](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2018/01/22/zinke-to-sign-land-swap-deal-allowing-road-through-alaskas-izembek-wilderness/?utm_term=.2c904e2a9245) ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2018/01/22/zinke-to-sign-land-swap-deal-allowing-road-through-alaskas-izembek-wilderness/?utm\\_term=.2c904e2a9245](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2018/01/22/zinke-to-sign-land-swap-deal-allowing-road-through-alaskas-izembek-wilderness/?utm_term=.2c904e2a9245)) announced in January that will allow a road through environmentally important wetlands in the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge.

We should keep the Tongass as it is. Rather than passing amendments that micromanage the Forest Service and undo the progress that has been made, Congress should assist the agency on pressing issues like the spiraling cost of wilderness firefighting. To restart road building in Alaska's most pristine national forests will only repeat history, leading to more lawsuits and uncertainty while undercutting the region's economic bases of fishing and tourism.

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