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A Win for America's Biggest National Forest May Also Be a Win for Wolves

That goes too for taxpayers, who are subsidizing unprofitable clear-cutting of old-growth trees in Alaska.



Waterfall in Endicott Arm near Juneau, Tongass National Forest, Southeast Alaska, USA (Photo: Wolfgang Kaehler/Getty)

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A Wednesday court ruling may mean the clock is ticking down on the old-growth logging industry of southeastern Alaska.

That may be bad news for [big timber](#), but it's great news for a [wolf population](#) on the brink of extinction as well as for activities and businesses that thrive on healthy, intact forestland, said Malena Marvin, executive director of the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council.

On July 29, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit reversed a lower court decision that would have allowed new road building on 9.5 million road-free acres of the 16.9-million-acre [Tongass National Forest](#) in Alaska.

The move effectively averted expansion of clear-cut logging on the Tongass, the nation's largest federally owned forest.

Barring an appeal to the Supreme Court by the state of Alaska, the ruling resolves a court case that began seven years ago, when SEACC and several other organizations contested the Bush administration's 2003 decision to exempt the Tongass from the Clinton-era "[roadless rule](#)" for national forests.

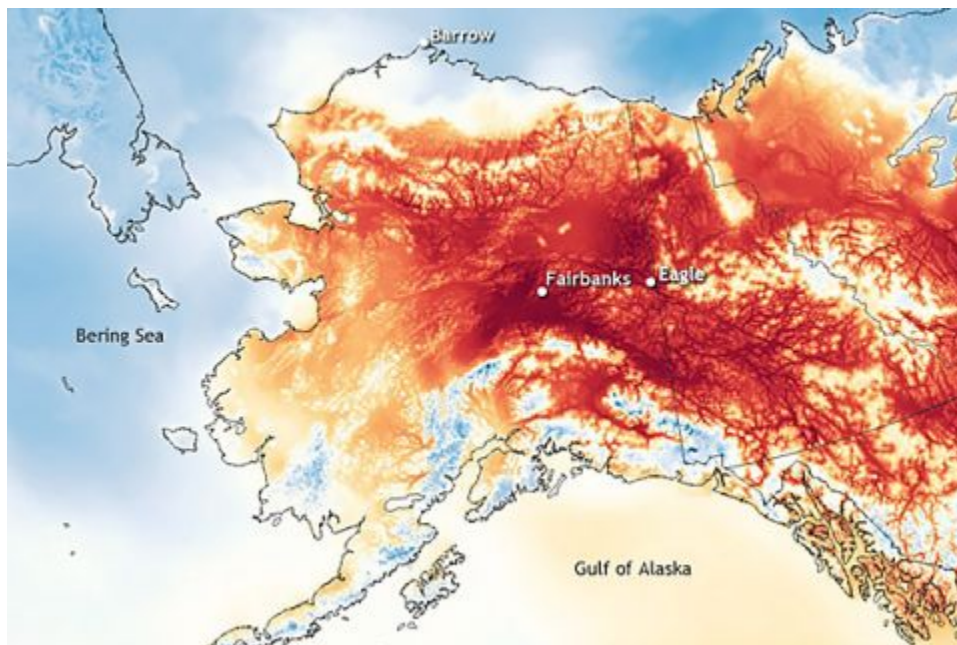
Clear-cutting in the Tongass has degraded habitat of Sitka black-tailed deer, said Marvin. This has contributed to a population crash among the wolves of Prince of Wales Island, whose numbers "are half of what they were last year, which is half of the year before," said Marvin. In June, Alaska wildlife officials confirmed [a steep drop in this wolf population](#).

The Prince of Wales Island population is part of a unique subspecies of gray wolf found only in Alaska called the Alexander Archipelago wolves. Wildlife

advocates have petitioned the Obama administration to extend federal endangered species protections to [these wolves](#).

Further clear-cutting might have also become problematic for thousands of Alaskans who hunt and gather food for their families. “The science shows that the habitat needed by wolves, and the biological interaction between wolves and their prey, involves humans—because we also hunt Sitka black-tailed deer,” said Marvin.

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There are 75,000 residents of Alaska in the Tongass region, according to Marvin. Around 33,000 live in the city of Juneau, with “the rest in small communities in the islands,” she said, and “almost everyone harvests something here or relies upon something from that harvest—deer, moose, salmon, crab, shrimp, halibut—the list goes on and on.”

If clear-cutting were to continue, “we’re talking about sacrificing all of those things, and one of the last places in the United States where you can just go grab food out of the water and not harm anything,” she said. All “for this tiny, export-oriented, clear-cut timber industry that needs government subsidies for support.”

The group Taxpayers for Common Sense has found that the U.S. Forest Service [loses more than \\$20 million a year](#) managing logging sales on the Tongass National Forest, while the industry is worth only about \$17 million a year.

Meanwhile, industries that depend on keeping the Tongass intact have become profitable economic mainstays in southeastern Alaska, Marvin said. “The salmon industry—commercial and sport fishing—is growing and is worth about \$1 billion a year. The same with recreation and tourism, which are worth about \$1 billion a year and growing.”

The streams and rivers flowing through the Tongass to the sea produce 25 percent of all wild salmon harvested in the northeastern Pacific Ocean, according to the U.S. Forest Service. “What other creature reflects how well we treat the land?” the forest’s fisheries manager recently told a Sitka business group, according to [KCAW radio](#). “It’s salmon.”

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According to [a report](#) from Southeast Conference, a pro-business group in southeastern Alaska, seafood and tourism were the second- and third-biggest economic sectors in the region, generating 11 percent and 8 percent, respectively, of southeastern Alaska’s employment earnings in 2013. Timber came in at less than 4 percent. (State and federal government led all other sectors at 35 percent.)

Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, criticized the Tongass ruling on Wednesday, calling it “a disappointment and a severe setback for the economies of Southeast Alaska” in a statement.

“Sen. Murkowski is a commonsense politician,” Marvin said. “We still hope that she is going to work with people to help lead this transition away from the clear-cut-and-export model” of the timber industry. “There are all sorts of thriving industries that don’t have anything to do with cutting old growth that are sustaining the region. Those are the ones she needs to be protecting.”

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