

Talking Tongass

By David Clark

I'm cynical about politics. And after a week on Capitol Hill lobbying to protect Southeast Alaska's wild salmon, I can't say much has changed. But when I flew back East earlier this spring with several other fishermen and tourism operators to advocate for the Tongass 77, I knew it was an honest effort. I was attempting to get through to lawmakers about the need to protect our salmon. I did it for my kids and the future kids, so that they can reap the same benefits I have enjoyed from the healthy, abundant wild salmon stocks we're blessed with in Southeast Alaska, home to the Tongass National Forest.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. You're probably wondering what I mean by the Tongass 77. Let me explain. I'm a seiner based out of Juneau. I came to Southeast Alaska as a college student and worked in canneries during the summer. I paid my dues on slime lines and then worked my way up to a deck-hand job on a purse seiner. Since then, I've purse seined every fishing season for the past 16 years. In the beginning it was a way to fund my ski bum and world traveler lifestyle. Later it became my main source of income and today it supports me, my wife and our two young sons. It's what I love to do and it's a good way to make a living.

My livelihood, like those of the 7,300 or so other people in Southeast whose jobs revolve around salmon or trout, is largely dependent on healthy habitat. It's the rain forest of Southeast Alaska,

with its 17,600 or so miles of salmon rivers, lakes and creeks that sustains my income and those of so many others. Fishermen commercially harvest nearly 50 million salmon every year in Southeast Alaska. The Tongass National Forest is one of the few places left where wild salmon remain healthy and abundant. That's why I support the Tongass 77, a grassroots campaign to get Congress



David Clark (top right) and a Trout Unlimited delegation visits Washington, D.C., in March 2013.

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to permanently protect 77 key salmon watersheds in Southeast Alaska that are open to development.

The goal of the Tongass 77 is to place 1.9 million acres of the Tongass National Forest, spanning 77 watersheds, into conservation status for fish. On the Tongass, there's a zoning category called LUD II (or Land Use Designation II) where fish and wildlife get top billing. Other activities like hunting, fish-friendly hydropower projects, sport fishing and other recreation, traditional gathering and even mineral development are still allowed. But fish and wildlife remain the top management focus. So LUD II is not a lock-up. Rather, I see it as a way to lock in the valuable fish and

wildlife resources that power the billion-dollar fishing and tourism industries that drive Southeast Alaska's economy, while also allowing other uses.

If the population numbers of Tongass salmon are currently healthy, you might ask why legislation like the Tongass 77 is needed. The answer is that these fish face many threats ranging from logging to mining to climate change and even hydropower generation, if poorly designed. These threats represent a potential repeat of the "death by a thousand cuts" scenario that has diminished salmon and trout populations across the world. I see the Tongass 77 proposal as a proactive step to head off the gradual decline of salmon and trout that has happened in California, the Pacific Northwest and many other places where these fish once thrived.

Did we make headway back in Washington? I sure hope so. I'd like to see some forward-thinking Congress member step up and sponsor a Tongass 77 bill. Like I said, I'm pretty cynical of the political process. But maybe if enough commercial and sport fishermen rally around the Tongass 77, it'll happen. I know the salmon would certainly appreciate it. **NF**

David Clark is a seiner based in Juneau, Alaska. He also writes the blog Saltwater Soldier, featured at NationalFisherman.com.

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Consequences

Keep calm and abandon ship

From U.S. Coast Guard reports

The skipper and two-man crew of an 84-foot steel dragger were fishing for cod one evening on a mid-March trip out of Dutch Harbor, Alaska. At about

9:30, the weather began to worsen.

With inclement weather forecast for the next day, the skipper decided this haul-back would be the day's last. The crew and their NMFS observer would steam to a nearby port, unload the catch and repair

some damaged gear.

The vessel cleared the north end of the pass around 11:55. The skipper asked to be awoken at 2 a.m., just before they'd enter port; the first mate took the helm.

At 1 a.m., the mate handed over the