



CONGRESS BLOG

THE HILL'S FORUM FOR LAWMAKERS AND POLICY PROFESSIONALS

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Investment in the Tongass is an investment in southeast Alaska

By Dale Pihlman

As the Forest Service revises its land management plan for the Tongass National Forest and Congress considers bills related to national forest management, the people of southeast Alaska and the Tongass are in the middle of another successful tourism and fishing season. We have a unique opportunity to make some forward-looking changes to support these community economic drivers in our largest national forest.

The Tongass is a world-class tourism destination, drawing more than a million visitors every year. Tourism brings \$1 billion to our region each year, directly employing 6,700 people and supporting a total of 10,000 year-round and seasonal jobs according to the McDowell Group and Southeast Conference. In Ketchikan, the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce counted 1,823 tourism jobs at the peak of the 2013 season (and even in the dark Alaska winter, there were still 716 tourism jobs!). The Southeast Conference predicts a new record for visitors in 2016. The visitor facilities and stunning scenery, the world-class fishing and wildlife, are truly the most valuable resources in this forest.

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Ketchikan is rightly known as “The Salmon Capital of the World.” Salmon are at the heart of communities like this one. Like tourism, fishing contributes approximately \$1 billion to our region each year, supporting 7,000 jobs. According to the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, in 2013 Ketchikan residents brought in \$23.4 million in gross income from fishing and landed 74 million pounds of fish, making our town the 18th largest port in the nation.

The communities of southeast Alaska are surrounded by the Tongass, which means the Forest Service plays a unique role here in that its Recreation and Fisheries programs can help our region continue to grow and support tens of thousands of jobs. These programs are an important part of the agency’s mission, and we hope that Congress and the Forest Service will make smart investments for our jobs and communities.

Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska) took an important step by highlighting the importance of the recreation programs in the Tongass that support tourism, and by urging the Forest Service to bring our region’s recreation program funding levels more in line with the rest of the

country. As a former commercial fisherman and tour operator, I am heartened that we are beginning to address this issue essential to our community. Prioritizing tourism and wild salmon in the Tongass will provide real opportunities for Alaskan businesses and all Americans who want to come see this great land.

Pihlman, a native of Ketchikan, Alaska, has worked in southeast Alaska as a commercial fisherman, fisheries biologist, and has operated cruises and charters in the region for more than 20 years. He is currently writing a history of the region.