



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Scientists Urge Congress to Enact Stronger Protections for Alaska Wild Salmon

Tongass 77 Would Permanently Protect 1.9 Million Acres in Tongass National Forest for Salmon and Trout

Anchorage, Alaska -- More than 230 scientists called on Congress today to enact stronger protections for wild salmon in Southeast Alaska's Tongass National Forest. They urged lawmakers to support a legislative proposal called the Tongass 77, which would permanently conserve the most productive and currently unprotected watersheds for salmon and trout across nearly two million acres of the Tongass National Forest.

The 17-million-acre Tongass National Forest produces about 70 percent of all wild salmon harvested from national forests in the United States and roughly 28 percent of Alaska's overall salmon catch, according to the U.S. Forest Service. Protecting the Tongass 77 is vital to sustaining this world-class fishery.

"The Tongass 77 watersheds are the backbone of a globally significant rainforest-fishery that rural economies depend on for their livelihoods," said Jack Williams, Ph.D., Trout Unlimited's senior scientist.

Scientific research conducted by Audubon Alaska and The Nature Conservancy and reviewed by local fisheries experts identified the Tongass 77 watersheds as the highest-quality habitat for salmon, trout and other wildlife that lacks permanent protection in the Tongass. Timber and mining, road building, more than 40 proposed and existing energy projects and several initiatives to privatize large swaths of the Tongass are currently in the works for these lands. Efforts to privatize several million acres of the forest come from Gov. Sean Parnell's Alaska Timber Jobs

Task Force, Sealaska Corp., and other Southeast Native groups. These initiatives and development activities have the potential to significantly impact the spawning and rearing habitat of Tongass salmon and trout as well as other species dependent on old-growth forest.

If enacted, Tongass 77 legislation would permanently protect approximately 1.9 million acres of public lands from ridge top to shoreline in a habitat conservation designation unique to the Tongass National Forest: Land Use Designation II (LUD II). There are currently twelve LUD II areas on the Tongass. Commercial timber harvest is not permitted in LUD II areas, but they are open for traditional gathering, fishing, hunting, recreational use and some hydropower generation. LUD II areas are managed for the long-term sustainable production of fish and wildlife.

“About 50 million wild salmon are harvested from the Tongass every year, helping to sustain a multi-billion-dollar industry. Salmon are a keystone species in Southeast Alaska and help drive the productivity and diversity of this rich coastal rainforest ecosystem,” said John Schoen, Ph.D., Audubon Alaska’s science advisor emeritus. Schoen has authored many scientific and popular articles about Alaska wildlife and is co-editor of the new book, *Ecology and Conservation of North Pacific Temperate Rainforests*.

In their letter to Congress, the scientists noted that populations of many species that are rare or have declined significantly in their southern ranges—including all Pacific salmon and steelhead trout species, brown (grizzly) bears, wolves, marten, bald eagles, marbled murrelets, and northern goshawks—are still abundant and secure in Southeast Alaska but continue to face substantial threats from climate change and ongoing habitat loss and fragmentation from development.

“If Congress enacts Tongass 77 legislation, approximately 58% of all Tongass salmon and trout spawning and rearing habitat would be permanently protected at the watershed scale. This would greatly benefit the commercial fishing fleet as well as anglers, subsistence users, recreationists and tour operators,” said Heather Hardcastle, a Juneau gillnet fisherman and biologist who works for Trout Unlimited, Alaska Program. Trout Unlimited supports the Tongass 77 proposal.

Learn more about the Tongass 77 and read the scientists’ letter to Congress at www.americansalmonforest.org/news-releases/

June 10, 2013

Dear Esteemed Members of Congress,

Recognizing the critical role the healthy, intact watersheds of the Tongass National Forest play in the production of salmon and trout in Southeast Alaska, their importance for maintaining natural ecosystem functions and biological diversity, and the significant economic and social value of these sustainable resources to the region, we, the undersigned members of the scientific community, urge you to support the “Tongass 77” legislative proposal.

Objective, comprehensive research identified the Tongass 77—those watersheds currently not protected at the watershed scale that comprise the most and highest quality habitat for salmon, trout and other wildlife.¹ **Tongass 77 legislation would ensure that approximately 1.9 million acres of the most productive salmon and trout watersheds currently open for development on the Tongass are permanently protected at the watershed scale in a habitat conservation designation unique to the Tongass National Forest: Land Use Designation II (LUD II).** There are currently twelve LUD II areas on the Tongass and these areas are managed for the sustainable production of fish and wildlife values in perpetuity for the American people.

In addition to being a significant part of one of the largest intact coastal temperate rainforests remaining on the planet, the 17-million-acre Tongass National Forest in Southeast Alaska is one of the world’s largest wild salmon-producing regions, annually contributing close to 50 million fish to Alaska’s multi-billion-dollar salmon industry. Salmon originating from the Tongass represent approximately 70 percent of all wild salmon harvested from our national forests and roughly 28 percent of Alaska’s overall salmon catch.² Populations of many species that are rare or have declined significantly in their southern ranges—including all Pacific salmon and steelhead trout species, brown (grizzly) bears, wolves, marten, bald eagles, marbled murrelets, and northern goshawks—are still abundant and secure in Southeast Alaska. Many of these species provide important subsistence and cultural values to Alaskans.

1

Albert, D. and J. Schoen. 2007. A Conservation Assessment and Resource Synthesis for the Coastal Forests and Mountains Ecoregion of Southeastern Alaska and the Tongass National Forest. Audubon Alaska and The Nature Conservancy, Anchorage, AK. Available online at <http://home.gci.net/~tnc/>.

2

USDA Forest Service, Alaska Region. 2012. Tongass Salmon Factsheet. Available online at http://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5408056.pdf

Salmon are considered a keystone species in Southeast Alaska and help drive the productivity and diversity of this rich coastal rainforest ecosystem. Salmon also underpin many robust industries and lifestyles in Southeast Alaska. The incredible salmon production of the Tongass is attributed to the presence of more than 17,000 miles of aquatic habitat,³ and the fact much of that habitat is still contained within intact, fully functioning watersheds.

Despite its current robust condition, the Tongass and its fish and wildlife face substantial threats. **Tongass salmon and wildlife are likely to be adversely affected by future development activities and climate change without additional protection.** Timber and mining development, road building, more than 40 proposed and existing energy projects and several initiatives to privatize large swaths of the Tongass are currently in the works. These development activities have the potential to significantly impact the spawning and rearing habitat of Tongass salmon and trout as well as other species affiliated with old-growth forest habitats. **Protecting the ecological integrity of key Tongass watersheds from further habitat degradation is crucial to the continuation of Southeast Alaska's salmon success story and to sustaining the productivity and resilience of this important rainforest ecosystem.**

Currently, about 35% of the salmon and trout spawning and rearing habitat on the Tongass is congressionally protected at the watershed scale. The balance remains open to development activities that could harm fish and their habitat. **The Tongass 77 legislative proposal would conserve at the watershed scale an additional 23% of the salmon and trout spawning and rearing habitat available on the Tongass on only 12% more of the total Tongass land base.** Thus, after enactment of Tongass 77 legislation, approximately 58% of Tongass salmon and trout spawning and rearing habitat would be protected at the watershed scale.⁴

We thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Please see attached twelve pages of 231 individual signature blocks.

3

USDA Forest Service, Alaska Region. 2012. Tongass Salmon Factsheet. Available online at http://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5408056.pdf

4

Audubon Alaska. 2012. Analysis of data in the Alaska Department of Fish and Game Anadromous Waters Catalog (<http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/sf/SARR/AWC/>). Unpublished.

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