

FORESTS

Push for roads in Tongass about more than timber — officials

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The Tongass National Forest in Alaska. U.S. Forest Service

The drive to open more of Tongass National Forest to road construction isn't just about boosting timber production, an Alaska Department of Natural Resources official said.

At a public hearing on the Forest Service's moves to ease restrictions on road construction in parts of the forest, DNR Deputy Commissioner Heidi Hansen pushed back against criticism that Alaska is seeking the change as a giveaway to a shrinking timber industry.

"This is about a lot more than timber," Hansen said, citing hydroelectric production and mineral interests as other enterprises that depend on access to the forest and may gain importance in the long run. "A lot of this is about looking forward."

The action by the Forest Service comes in response to Alaska's petition to lift the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule for the Tongass. Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue, whose department oversees the Forest Service, said he's looking for a solution that balances the state's economic interests with the need to protect the 16.8-million-acre Tongass, by far the nation's biggest national forest ([E&E News PM](#), Aug. 2).

About 9.3 million acres in the Tongass is designated as roadless under the 2001 rule. Forest Service officials said that they're not looking to change the land management plan for the Tongass, which dictates timber harvest and other uses, but that the plan could receive a closer look later, depending on the outcome of the roadless rule.

The hearing yesterday in Washington was the only such public meeting scheduled outside Alaska before a "scoping period" on the proposal ends Oct. 15. Further public comment periods are coming, however, as the

Forest Service drafts environmental impact statements and other documents related to the state-specific rulemaking.

The Forest Service expects to draft an environmental impact statement by next summer, said Robin Dale, the agency's Alaska roadless technical coordinator. A final rule would be published in summer 2020, she said.

Proponents, including state officials and Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), say the Tongass should be considered separately from other national forests, due in part to southeast Alaska's economic reliance on it. Restricting road construction under the 2001 rule stymies timber as well as other businesses that depend on forest access, they say.

Alaska's federal lawmakers have pushed for an outright exception from the roadless rule; the House version of the 2018 farm bill includes such a provision, championed by Rep. Don Young (R-Alaska), although the Senate version doesn't. Prospects are unclear for its inclusion in a final bill, which is stuck in conference between leaders of the two chambers' agriculture committees (*E&E Daily*, June 22).

Critics, including many environmental and tourism-related groups, say opening more areas to roads would spoil pristine areas and encourage clearcutting of old-growth trees.

Tourism, cruises and fishing, not timber, are the foundation of Alaska's economy, said Hunter McIntosh, president of the Boat Co., a Washington state company that conducts boat cruises in Alaska and has a special-use permit with the Tongass.

"From an economic standpoint, it just doesn't make sense," McIntosh said.

The Forest Service has received thousands of comments on the issue, including many form letters, officials said.

Among individually written letters, the president of a southeast Alaska construction machinery company, Tyler Rental Inc., said he's seen the economy shrink with restricted road access to the forest.

"We are losing our Alaskan year around jobs and economy to summer temporary jobs," said the company's president, Randy Johnson, in a Sept. 18 letter. "This is very destructive to the health and welfare of our Southeast Alaska communities."

The president of the First Things First Alaska Foundation, Neil MacKinnon, said in submitted comments that the roadless rule inhibits "green" energy such as hydropower, geothermal resources and wind power.

Some opponents of the proposal, including the Alaska Wilderness League, pressed for a longer public comment period, saying the complexity of the issue demands it. They wrote to the agency Sept. 18, asking for a 30-day extension and more public meetings outside Alaska, including in population centers such as Los Angeles, Seattle and Minneapolis.