

Will Tongass salmon find champions in Congress?

By Pat Forgey | June 10, 2013

The Tongass National Forest salmon populations are currently healthy, but scientists want to take protective measures that will ensure fish aren't adversely impacted by logging.

JUNEAU -- Environmental groups are hoping to give salmon -- and the forest on which they rely -- top priority in 77 key watersheds throughout the Tongass National Forest.

The proposal, called Tongass 77, would ban activities that might harm salmon, such as logging, and has faced criticism from Southeast Alaska's struggling timber industry.

Tongass 77 has also faced difficulty in winning national support and has yet to find a sponsor in Congress, but advocates Monday made public a letter signed by more than 230 scientists endorsing the plan and trying to give it a jump start.

"The forest is not currently managed as it should be, with salmon as the top priority," said Jack Williams, senior scientist with Trout Unlimited, which along with Audubon Alaska is promoting the plan.

The Tongass's salmon populations are currently healthy, the Medford, Ore.-based scientist acknowledged, but said they need better protection to stay that way.

That's protection that salmon runs elsewhere didn't have, he said.

"In the Tongass we don't want a repeat of the 'death by a thousand cuts' scenario that has decimated the salmon runs in California, the Columbia River Basin, and elsewhere," Williams said.

What the Tongass 77 plan would do that's unusual is to not just keep a buffer strip between streams and logging, but keep logging entirely out of those 77 watersheds, making up 1.9 million acres of the 17-million-acre Tongass National Forest.

With Southeast's wet weather and steep terrain, "100 feet just really isn't adequate to really protect the streams, especially if we have timber harvest, road building, those sorts of things," Williams said.

The Tongass 77 plan would bar logging and road building, but allow mining, hunting, and hydroelectric projects that wouldn't harm fish.

The Alaska Forest Association's Owen Graham said the plan wasn't needed to help salmon, and would hurt the region's few remaining sawmills.

"I consider it another lockup, and I consider it unnecessary," Graham said.

The salmon population, he said, had doubled in Southeast over the last 50-60 years, he said, even while logging was booming.

"That's an indication that logging doesn't harm the fish habitat," he said.

Currently, he said, only about 2 percent of the Tongass is available for logging, with half of that so young it won't be ready for harvest for 2-3 decades.

Trout Unlimited biologist and commercial gillnetter Heather Hardcastle denied that.

"The goal has not been in any way to lock up more of the Tongass National Forest, given that it is a National Forest managed under multiple use," she said. The intent is to see that logging and other such uses don't harm the valuable fishing industry.

"Salmon are the keystone species in the Southeast, and drive the ecology of the region," said John Schoen of Anchorage, science adviser emeritus for Audubon Alaska, and a retired Alaska Department of Fish and Game biologist

Schoen said that the protection they were seeking under Tongass 77 would be similar to Land Use Designation II, under the Tongass Land Management Plan. Those protections are already in place several watersheds on Chichagof Island, and are similar to wilderness protections elsewhere in Southeast.

Four of the Tongass 77 watersheds are on land sought by Sealaska Corp., Southeast's regional Native corporation as part of the finalization of its Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Act allotment.

The Southeast Alaska Conservation Council has backed a bill introduced by Sen. Lisa Murkowski to transfer the remaining 70-80,000 acres owed to Sealaska, but that support has irked some other environmental groups.

SEACC's executive director, Lindsey Ketchel, said Monday that she supported both what Murkowski and the Tongass 77 plan were attempting to do.

"Conceptually, this makes a world of sense," Ketchel said, but noted that SEACC's board had yet to carefully review the various plans' maps.

A land transfer plan supported by U.S. Rep. Don Young that contains much more environmentally sensitive land is not acceptable to SEACC, she said.

"We gave very tempered support for Lisa's version, with a recognition that it still needed work," she said.

Hardcastle, of Juneau, said that Sealaska's lands bill was one of the threats facing the Tongass that the Tongass 77 plan would address.

The letter by the 230 scientists was sent to every member of Congress Monday. Next on the agenda for Trout Unlimited and Audubon Alaska is to find a sponsor for a bill to implement Tongass 77, she said.

"There's certainly a number of members, senators in particular, what are interested in potentially co-sponsoring or championing this legislation," Hardcastle said.

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