

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 17, 2019

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue,

We are writing to express our concern that the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) has failed to adequately consult with, address, and incorporate the concerns of the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian people into the rulemaking process for the Draft Environmental Impact Statement on the proposed Alaska Roadless Rule. We urge you to listen to the Alaska Native nations who will be most impacted by the decision, and who have subsisted on and actively managed the Tongass since time immemorial. To uphold the rights of Southeast Alaska Native communities, we support the “no action” alternative (Alternative #1).

Eliminating the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule from the Tongass National Forest will threaten the integrity of America’s largest natural carbon sink when we should be doing the opposite, restoring and protecting ecosystem function to safeguard our future and to protect the rights of indigenous peoples. As the largest intact temperate rainforest remaining in the world, the Tongass provides an enormous service by storing 3.5 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent and each year sequestering an amount equal to the annual emissions of over a half a million cars. In order to respond to the mounting climate crisis and achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions, the United States needs the Tongass National Forest to be functioning optimally. While trees are theoretically a renewable resource, old-growth forests take hundreds of years to regain their original complexity and function. Actions that undermine the quality or extent of productive old growth habitat on the Tongass are woefully shortsighted.

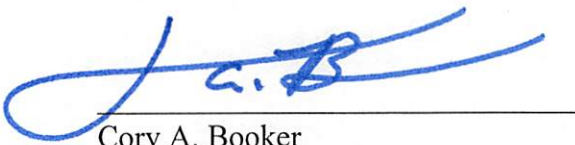
Indigenous communities in Alaska are at the frontlines of climate change, and stand to be most impacted by its broad effects. These communities have also historically been disproportionately affected by industrial scale resource extraction, as well as being marginalized in decision-making processes that have tended to favor corporate special interests over community priorities. Now, climate change threatens the availability of traditional resources and native foods, which will impact rural, predominantly Alaska Native communities first. Many of these communities are food insecure and depend on local flora and fauna for their subsistence, as well as traditional cultural practices. Furthermore, the rushed timeline of this rulemaking process has disproportionately affected some of the communities that stand to be most impacted by a full exemption. For these reasons, the USFS-led NEPA process to date is in violation of the agency’s mission to achieve environmental justice as mandated through Executive Order 12898.

Six federally recognized Tribal governments in Southeast Alaska, the Angoon Cooperative Association, Central Council of Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, Hoonah Indian Association, Hydaburg Cooperative Association, Organized Village of Kake, and Organized Village of Kasaan, have voiced their unanimous opposition to the “full exemption” preferred alternative and expressed their repeated disappointment in how the USFS conducted the NEPA process. In an unprecedented joint letter sent in October, the six Tribes called out the USFS for failing to satisfy the legal requirements of two steps of the NEPA process (40 CFR § 1501.6). Though the Tribes participated as cooperating agencies, the USFS fell short in its duty to “Use the environmental analysis and proposals of cooperating agencies with jurisdiction by law or special expertise, to the maximum extent possible,” and “Meet with a cooperating agency at the latter’s request.”

The federally recognized tribes representing the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian are the original land stewards of Southeast Alaska and their traditional indigenous knowledge should be of paramount importance when making public land management decisions that affect their traditional homelands. Yet the USFS has selected a preferred alternative that faces unprecedented opposition from the tribes after a rushed and disrespectful process. In addition to violations of the NEPA process, the agency’s failure to respect the government-to-government relationship owed to the tribes is a violation of the federal Indian trust responsibilities. According to Richard Chalyee Éesh Peterson, president of the Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, the tribes’ “pleas for respect and for justice have been ignored,” despite meeting “arbitrary and expedited deadlines” to provide comments to the Forest Service. The political motivations behind the Alaska Roadless Rulemaking process and the “full exemption” preferred alternative have also raised concerns for the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians and the National Congress of American Indians, who have both passed resolutions in favor of the “no action” alternative.

The preferred alternative is an unjustifiable overreach. Fishing and tourism, industries reliant on intact forests, are of far greater economic importance to the region than the small sector still reliant on old-growth timber extraction. The costs of destabilizing the Tongass that will undoubtedly occur under the preferred alternative, compromising the forest’s capacity to store carbon and provide sustenance to indigenous communities, are great and far outweigh the benefits that could be accrued by a handful of companies. We urge you to take a precautionary approach to safeguard America’s largest natural carbon sink, respect indigenous rights, and choose the “no action” alternative.

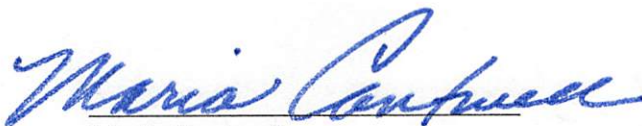
Sincerely,



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



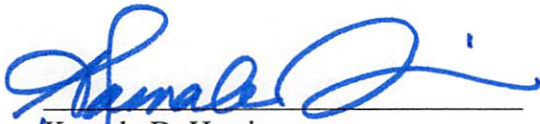
Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator



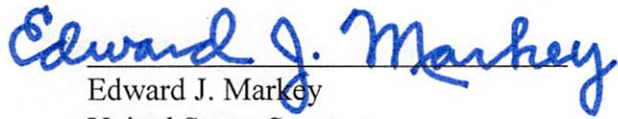
Maria Cantwell
United States Senator



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Kamala D. Harris
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Tom Udall
United States Senator



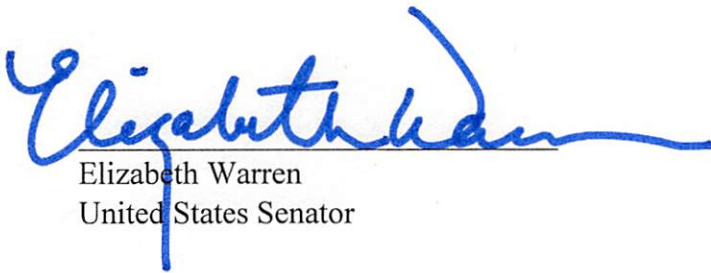
Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator



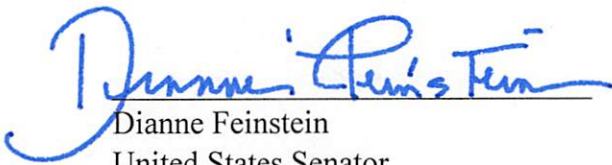
Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



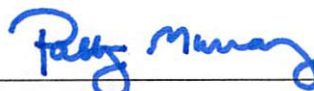
Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Martin Heinrich
United States Senator



Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator



Patty Murray
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator

