

# Plan to lift roadless rule in Alaska's Tongass national forest threatens economy

The Tongass National Forest in southeast Alaska — one of the world's last intact temperate rainforests — helps feed Americans across the country, enriches the environment, and contributes to a tourism economy that surrounding communities depend on.

So it's not surprising that [two-thirds of voters](#) in the area around the forest oppose logging these lands or allowing it only in areas where logging roads already exist.

But that didn't stop the Trump administration from proposing, on Oct. 15, to lift protections on more than 9 million acres of the Tongass — nearly 40 percent of the remaining [intact forest landscape](#) managed by the U.S. Forest Service in the entire country.

This would be the result of rolling back a 2001 policy called the Roadless Area Conservation Rule, which prohibits construction of roads or other infrastructure in designated areas, including the Tongass, managed by the U.S. Forest Service.

Roadless areas convey immense benefits, which include [protecting clean water sources](#) in 661 of the more than 2,000 major watersheds in the country. It provides undisturbed places for hunting, fishing, and other recreation; and safeguarding habitat for a vast range of wildlife species. In the Tongass, that includes huge numbers of salmon, which contribute significantly to our country's seafood economy.

About 25 percent of the [wild salmon](#) that populate the West Coast of the U.S. are hatched in Tongass waters, and opening more of the national forest to logging would immediately threaten their ability to spawn in the forest's pristine freshwater streams. And the intact areas of the Tongass are vital, because of the impressive capacity of trees and woodlands to store carbon, increasing resiliency to climate change.

Removing roadless protections in the Tongass would carry other costs. The independent nonprofit group Taxpayers for Common Sense reports that timber sales in the Tongass have resulted in [taxpayer losses of nearly \\$600 million](#) over the past two decades — \$30 million per year — because “the costs incurred by the Forest Service to administer its timber sales program have far surpassed receipts generated from the resulting sales.”

The group predicts that those losses would keep climbing without the Roadless Rule, due to the high, taxpayer-subsidized cost of building and maintaining roads in such remote areas.

Elsewhere in Alaska, the Forest Service plan could also threaten the health of the Chugach National Forest, more than 400 miles to the northwest of Tongass, because the proposal gives the agency's chief forester in the region the authority to remove Roadless Rule protections from any of the currently protected [5.4 million acres in the Chugach](#), with no analysis of impacts and a public comment period of just 30 days.

The Roadless Rule has been a cornerstone of federal forest management for nearly two decades, helping the federal government balance the sustainable use of timber on one hand with development and science-based conservation on the other.

The policy enjoys broad public support, with 75 percent of Americans in favor compared with 16 percent who oppose the rule, according to [a poll](#) conducted in March; that support was 77 percent among rural residents.

A [separate poll](#) in August found that two-thirds of voters in southeast Alaska favored either prohibiting logging or allowing it only in areas where logging roads

already exist. And the majority of the 140,000 [public comments](#) submitted after the state of Alaska petitioned the White House to remove the Roadless Rule protections in Tongass supported keeping the policy in place. Further, U.S. lawmakers from both sides of the aisle have praised the rule as an effective way to conserve important lands.

Half of southeast Alaska's old-growth forest has [already been harvested](#), activity that felled hundreds of thousands of giant, centuries-old trees. Also, renewed large-scale logging, which would be allowed under the administration's plan, would [damage](#) two of Alaska's biggest economic engines, tourism and the seafood industry, which make up nearly 26 percent of the local economy.



That's why last month more than 200 commercial fishermen and women in southeast Alaska sent a [letter](#) to Agriculture Secretary [Sonny Perdue](#) [George \(Sonny\) Ervin Perdue](#) [Plan to lift roadless rule in Alaska's Tongass national forest threatens economy](#) [House Democrat asks USDA to halt payouts to Brazilian meatpacker under federal probe](#) [From state agriculture departments to Congress: Our farmers need the USMCA](#) [MORE](#) and Forest Service Chief Vicki Christiansen asking for a delay in the plan's release and urging a roadless rule that "prioritizes protecting and sustaining the Southeast salmon resource and its habitat in perpetuity," including phasing out old growth, clear-cut timber practices.

The Forest Service began considering eliminating roadless area protections in the Tongass in response to a petition filed by the state of Alaska in early 2018. The agency's analysis was proceeding as it should, with an emphasis on science and thoughtful deliberation, until February 2019, when [Alaska Gov. Mike Dunleavy](#)



[asked](#) President [Donald Trump](#) [Donald John Trump](#) [Dems want tougher language on election security in defense bill](#) [Five aides to Van Drew resign ahead of his formal switch to GOP](#) [The myth of the conservative bestseller](#) [MORE](#) to accelerate a "total exemption" from the rule — prompting the president to direct Secretary Perdue to exempt the Tongass from the roadless rule as a matter of Forest Service policy.

By predetermining the outcome of the Forest Service's environmental review, the administration is undercutting the important role of sound science in agency decision-making and harming the credibility of the Forest Service as a responsible land steward — credibility that the agency has worked for decades to build.

Indigenous communities have argued against a full exemption of the Tongass from the roadless rule. In October, the Organized Village of Kake, the Tlingit-Haida Central Council (composed of 16 Southeast Tribes), and the Angoon Community Association in southeast Alaska signed [a letter to Secretary Perdue](#) asking that the Forest Service maintain current protections for Southeast Tribes' customary and traditional use areas — the places they hunt for moose, fish for salmon, and gather medicines from the forest. That same month, the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians and the National Congress of American Indians passed resolutions requesting that Secretary Perdue leave the rule intact.

Keeping the roadless rule in place in Tongass would show that the administration cares about Alaska's commercial fishing and tourism industries; Alaska native people; hunters and anglers; and the majority of Americans who favor this sensible policy. Conversely, removing the roadless rule would jeopardize an irreplaceable resource while disregarding the strongly held views of many Alaskans, and other Americans, who want a thriving Tongass National Forest and its many benefits around for future generations.

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