Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership

His Vision ~ Our Mission

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December 17, 2019

USDA Forest Service
Attn: Alaska Roadless Rule
P.O. Box 21628
Juneau, Alaska 99802

RE: TRCP Comments on USDA Rulemaking for an Alaska Roadless Rule

Dear Alaska Roadless Rulemaking Team:

The Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership (TRCP) is a national conservation organization with more than 100,000 members working to guarantee all Americans a quality place to hunt and fish. We are writing in regard to the management of 9.2 million acres of national forest inventoried roadless areas within the Tongass National Forest (Tongass NF) in Alaska, and we offer the following comments on the proposed Alaska roadless rule exemption and DEIS.

The Tongass NF supports robust salmon runs that are critical for subsistence, recreation, and commercial fishing; rivers, lakes, and streams in the Tongass NF supply 80 percent of the commercial salmon in Southeast Alaska.[i] Within the Tongass NF, 49 percent of salmon stream miles are contained by roadess areas.[ii] Roadless areas in the Tongass NF also support excellent habitat for Sitka black-tailed deer, an important food source for Alaskans and one of the few big game species in Alaska that out-of-state hunters can legally pursue without a guide, making them recreationally important as well. Sitka black-tailed deer are dependent on the overstory of old growth forests to intercept snow and provide more forage during winter months than can be provided by early seral forests, and logging has been shown to reduce their numbers.[iii] Black bear, mountain goat, moose, and Roosevelt elk are also important game species found in the Tongass NF. All of these species are important to our members, and increased roadbuilding and logging in the Tongass NF would likely have a detrimental effect on fisheries and game species over the long-term.

Since our founding in 2002, the TRCP been involved in the management and conservation of national forest roadless areas for the benefit of fish, wildlife, and America's 47 million sportsmen and women. We support the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule (2001 RACR) and the benefits it provides to clean water for both people and fish, high-quality wildlife habitat, and excellent hunting and fishing opportunities. The conservation management of these lands has long been established and is working. Despite our strong support for the 2001 RACR, the TRCP played a major role in the creation of the Idaho Roadless Rule and the Colorado

Roadless Rule, and we are supportive of those final rules because they were:

- established through an inclusive public process;
- based on stakeholder engagement that included pragmatic representatives from a broad base of interest groups; and
- resulted in net conservation gain, whereby new development allowances for roads, timber harvest, and mineral extraction were compensated for with increased safeguards for the highest value roadless areas.

When the Alaska roadless rulemaking process was initiated, we were optimistic that the process could result in a successful and durable solution similar to Idaho and Colorado, and one such solution was within the range of proposed options recommended by the Citizens Advisory Committee chartered by Governor Walker. To that end, the TRCP joined other partners and local businesses to actively support a compromise alternative that would include Alaska-specific flexibilities for roadless area management, while protecting the majority of inventoried roadless areas on the Tongass and increasing conservation for critical salmon-bearing watersheds and wildlife habitat.

Despite our hopes for a durable compromise for Alaska, the USFS proposed preferred Alternative 6 is the most extreme option and—if adopted—would eliminate an entire layer of conservation safeguards from 9.2 million acres of undeveloped lands and create long-term uncertainty for valuable fish and wildlife habitat and the people of Alaska. Alternative 6 would also cause economic and social harm by damaging existing tourism and recreation activities, as well as impacting salmon and big game species that are hunted and fished for subsistence and recreational uses, as well as commercial fishing.

The preferred alternative in the DEIS and proposed rule will jeopardize the goodwill and trust that has been established through many years of collaboration among a wide range of local interests, including through the recent Tongass Land Management Plan amendment. We also believe that—contrary to the stated purpose and need for this rulemaking—the preferred alternative is so extreme that it is unlikely to be a durable outcome for these lands, as stakeholder groups will work to see its reversal.

Because the preferred alternative (Alternative 6) lacks balance and would undermine years of collaboration, **we request that the USFS choose Alternative 1, the no action alternative, and retain the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule as the management rule for all roadless areas within the Tongass NF and Alaska.**

<u>If the USFS chooses to proceed with the completion of a state specific roadless rule for Alaska, we believe that the USFS must shift direction and complete a rule that represents a durable compromise. To that end, we offer the following recommendations:</u>

The TRCP believes that if a state specific Alaska rule is to be completed, it must result in net conservation gain, whereby new development allowances for roads, timber harvest, and mineral extraction are compensated for with increased safeguards for the highest value roadless areas. The current preferred alternative is polarizing and indefensible. From reviewing the alternatives, the TRCP believes that a potentially supportable Alaska specific roadless rule—one that protects roadless areas,

while providing certainty for local communities—would be Alternative 2, with the inclusion of a specific element from Alternative 3.

First, the TRCP would be supportive of the updated inventory in Alternative 2 that increases the geographic scope of roadless areas by adding an additional 133,000 acres as Alaska Roadless Areas while removing 113,000 acres where roadless characteristics have been substantially altered (commonly referred to as "roaded roadless"). It simply makes sense to use the most up-to-date and accurate roadless inventory, and this updated inventory would potentially make 18,000 acres of old growth available to local mills, providing the wood products industry with a bridge as they transition from old growth to second growth timber production. If paired with additional watershed protections as discussed below, this change would be consistent with the 2016 Tongass Land Management Plan Amendment, which TRCP supports, and would reflect the compromises that were created during the amendment process.

The TRCP would also support the provision in Alternative 2 that would allocate Watershed Priority to 3.25 million acres, primarily identified as T77 Watersheds and TNC/Audubon Conservation Priority Areas. These areas provide the most vital fisheries and wildlife habitat in the Tongass NF and deserve elevated safeguards.

The TRCP would support keeping the LUD areas within the management direction of the roadless rule and aligning timber harvest with congressional intent, as proposed in Alternative 2. The TRCP is generally comfortable with the approach in Alternative 2 of proposing timber harvest exceptions for Roadless Priority ARAs at a slightly broader level than under the 2001 RACR to better address Alaska's unique economic development needs. We would also support writing timber harvest restrictions slightly narrower for the Watershed Priority ARAs to address aquatic and terrestrial habitat needs that are unique to Alaska's rural economic conditions and subsistence activities. This tailored management approach is very similar in concept to what was done with tiered levels of protections in both the Idaho Roadless Rule and the Colorado Roadless Rule, and we believe it has worked well.

We are also generally supportive of the road building restrictions in Alternative 2 that would make the Roadless Priority ARA road construction/reconstruction exceptions slightly broader than under the 2001 RACR; make the Watershed Priority ARA road construction/reconstruction exceptions slightly narrower than under the 2001 RACR; and make the LUD II Priority ARA road construction/reconstruction exceptions slightly broader than under the 2001 RACR. While many of these projects may be approved using flexibility already present in the 2001 RACR, the TRCP can support clarifications that assist local community objectives. As stated above, this tiered management approach is analogous to what was adopted in the Colorado and Idaho roadless rules, and it has a track record of working because it offers compromise that benefits both conservation and development interests.

Finally, from Alternative 3, the TRCP would support adopting the restrictions on old-growth timber harvest on the portion of the T77 and TNC/Audubon Conservation Areas that extend beyond roadless areas boundaries. Even outside of roadless areas, the T77 and TNC/Audubon Conservation Areas collectively provide the most important areas for long-term conservation of temperate rainforests and

associated fisheries, social, economic and ecological values, and they deserve elevated conservation measures. Because conservation of these areas is justified based on the best scientific information and is broadly supported by stakeholders, extending additional safeguards to the T77 Watersheds and the TNC/Audubon Conservation Priority areas is the best opportunity to create balance in the Alaska Roadless Rule. In context of our other recommendations, this provision would go a long way in establishing a state specific roadless rule that we could potentially support.

Additional comments

In addition to the changes above, we ask that all changes related to the Chugach National Forest (Chugach NF) be removed from the final rule. U.S. Department of Agriculture and USFS materials repeatedly communicated the intent that changes would apply only to the Tongass NF, and that the 2001 RACR would continue to apply on the Chugach NF. While the changes proposed in the preferred alternative may seem narrow and administrative in scope, they would create an enormous loophole in how the 2001 RACR may be modified in the future.

If the intent is simply to allow for administrative corrections and updates to roadless areas on the Chugach NF, then the language is not needed because the 2001 RACR allows for updates and revisions of inventoried roadless area maps. If the intent is to allow future land managers the ability to change the classification and boundaries of roadless areas on the Chugach NF after public notice and a 45-day comment period, then that action is beyond the purpose and need for this rulemaking, and was not appropriately disclosed or analyzed.

Conclusion

The 2001 RACR currently provides important safeguards to unroaded, intact habitats and watersheds on the Tongass NF. These areas are important for hunting and subsistence use of big game species, and they encompass watersheds critical for commercial and recreational fishing and other tourism.

We support the No Action Alternative and continued application of the 2001 RACR and—if the USFS chooses to proceed with a state focused rule—we believe that a modified Alternative 2 could offer a path to a durable, compromise option for Alaska that allows for increased flexibility on the Tongass NF while improving net conservation outcomes.

We appreciate the USFS's recognition of the progress represented by the 2016 Tongass Land Management Plan amendment, and the importance of a durable approach that reflects the biological, social and economic situation in and around the Tongass NF. Moving forward with Alternative 6 in the final rule would directly contradict those goals. It risks upending hard-won collaborative progress, and could cause biologic, social and economic harm, including to critical fish and wildlife habitat and to businesses that depend on those species. It could also make it more difficult to advance timber sales and other projects, because of the loss of collaborative support.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments on the USFS proposed rule and DEIS for roadless areas in the Tongass NF in Alaska. We hope that you will change course and work towards a durable

outcome that safeguards Alaska roadless areas, while benefitting local communities, tribal interests, and sportsmen and women.

Sincerely,

Joel Webster
Director, Center for Western Lands
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Missoula, MT 59802

[i] Tongass National Forest Salmon Factsheet. Available at https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd554592.pdf
[ii] 2018 Alaska Anadromous Waters Catalog (AWC)
[iii] Schoen, J.W., M.D. Kirchoff, and M. H. Thomas. 1985. Seasonal distribution and habitat use by Sitka black-tailed deer in southeast Alaska. Alaska Dept. Fish and Game. Available at: http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/home/library/pdfs/wildlife/research_pdfs/sitka_black_tailed_deer_old_growth_relationships_implications_management.pdf