

Tongass Roadless Rule reversal threatens brown bear populations

By LAVERN BEIER

I was a brown bear expert in the Tongass with Alaska Department of Fish and Game for 35 years from 1981 retiring in 2016. I've slogged up dozens of bear-infested salmon streams in study areas on Admiralty and Chichagof Islands and along Southeast's mainland stretching from Misty Fjords National Monument to the south up the coast north to Yakutat Forelands and Malaspina Glacier in the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park Preserve. I've captured/immobilized, radio-tagged and radio-tracked over 1,000 bears collecting scientific data and conducted DNA/population estimates. I fitted the first brown bear in the Tongass with a VHF radio-transmitter on Greens Creek on Admiralty Island in 1981.

Brown bears are the second slowest reproducing of the 28 big game species in North America. In the early 1800s, grizzly bears occurred in nearly every state west of the Mississippi River but as a result of human encroachment by 1956, only three states contained marginally sustainable grizzly populations. Historical, eco-

logical and biological evidence across North America are clear that road access, combined with human development/activities within brown bear home ranges, will with certainty lead to fewer brown bears and potentially threaten brown bear populations. More importantly, a brown bear population could easily suffer dramatically if the female component of a population is systematically removed.

Today, six of eight bear species in the world are endangered. To assure cub survival, female bears accompanied with cubs of all eight bear species on the planet require a safe escape location from being killed by male bears/predators. The Tongass old-growth trees adjacent salmon streams are key components for cub survival.

The Forest Service manages the forest on a 100-year harvest rotation. Most brown bear den sites in the Tongass are located in the base of large live or dead standing trees >36" diameter or in natural rock cavities. Clearcuts have no value to wildlife once the canopy closes in at 12-

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14 years. Stream buffers along anadromous streams are 500 feet, less on private land.

Brown bear studies in the Tongass are well documented in valleys adjacent to salmon streams encompassing logging roads, clear-cuts and second growth. Here, male brown bears are forced to adjust to the habitat alterations and stay close to salmon streams and dominate the stream. Simultaneously, female brown bears with and without cubs are now also forced to adjust their salmon fishing strategies in the altered landscape within their home range. They now must navigate through clear-cuts and second growth in search of safe escape trees for their cubs far away from male dominated salmon streams.

Consequently, these female brown bears and cubs spend little time on male dominated salmon streams fishing and consuming high protein fat salmon necessary for denning and cub survival. These female brown bears spend more time burning energy navigating through clear-cuts and second-growth seeking refuge in standing trees and avoiding males versus fishing. The end result of an altered landscape within a female brown bear's home range increases cub mortality by males compounded by the fact these female brown bears do not consume adequate salmon for denning and cub survival. In addition, lack of high reliable salmon fat for pregnant female brown bears means smaller litter sizes. Cumulatively, gradually fewer surviving cubs and fewer bears.

To compound threats to brown bear populations in the Tongass, from a brown bears' perspective, roads evolve into bear trails as a travel route of least resistance. This simultaneously increases bear encounters

with man's activities resulting in exponentially increasing mortality of all demographics of the population.

There are nine distinct DNA brown bear populations in the Tongass, each unique in the world. Reversal of the existing Roadless Rule would have cumulative adverse effects on six of these nine brown bear populations. Perhaps more paramount, climate change is not addressed in reversal of the Roadless Rule, despite the fact it has potential to affect future brown bear populations more adversely than any other human activity.

It is well documented, visitors travel to Alaska with hopes of seeing three animals, bald eagles, whales and brown bears. Wilderness is the symbol of brown bear habitat, and God isn't making wilderness anymore. Once it's gone, it's gone forever.

• Lavern Beier is a former wildlife researcher with Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Division of Wildlife Conservation. He retired after 43 years, from 1973 to 2016. He participated in a variety of wildlife research/management projects throughout the Tongass National Forest. Primarily known as a brown bear expert, his expertise includes the safe capture, immobilizing, radio-tagging/tracking and ecology of Sitka black-tailed deer, mountain goats, wolf, wolverine, elk and black bears.

Embrace a future with full benefits of healthy Tongass

By AUSTIN WILLIAMS

I wrote a My Turn in support of keeping protections for roadless areas on the Tongass that prompted responses from Bert Burkhardt and Wayne Nicolls, both of whom seek to expand clear-cut logging of old-growth forest into new and larger parts of the Tongass. Their responses display fundamental differences between how I and they value the Tongass and make clear it's far past time for an honest debate about the benefits of roadless areas.

Roadless areas often contain our best fish, wildlife, subsistence and recreation resources, which in turn are the basis for our way of life and economy. Testimony at all of the recent public meetings show that Alaskans agree. The economics also bear this out, with fishing and tourism industries accounting for 26% of all local jobs. We rely on roadless areas for salmon to catch, deer to hunt, bears to see, and beautiful scenery to attract visitors. These are our most valuable forest products.

Of course, not every acre of the Tongass is equal. Some places are productive forest

MY TURN

Although the Forest Service has made clear that all 58 projects proposed in roadless areas in Alaska have been approved — including mining, energy and community infrastructure projects — we were and are open to seeing if there is a way to make this process better.

that support abundant salmon and wildlife populations. Other places produce lower volume trees, or are rock, ice, muskegs, etc. A recent peer-reviewed paper analyzing Forest Service data found that, while logging had removed 12% of the productive old-growth forest on the Tongass, it had targeted the best areas and reduced "the highest volume of contiguous old growth by 66.5%." On Prince of Wales Island, where logging has been most intense, "such forests have been reduced by 93.8%." Roads necessary to support this logging compound the problem. Alarming, a recent Forest Service survey of bridges and culverts along roads crossing

salmon streams found that "33 percent of those have been determined not to meet State of Alaska fish passage standards." These are not lies, as others would want you to believe. They are the legacy left to us from decades of unsustainable old-growth logging that high-graded the best and most valuable forest lands and ravaged our salmon streams.

The question for us now is whether we will learn from these mistakes and start fixing the problem, or continue to perpetuate outdated ways of thinking by building new logging roads and clear-cuts into undeveloped portions of the Tongass that leaves an even worse legacy for our kids. If the Roadless Rule

is lifted, we must expect clear-cut logging of old-growth forest to expand into new parts of the forest, the costs to taxpayers and massive backlog of road maintenance to balloon further out of control, and the costs to fish and wildlife and the people and businesses that depend on them to compound.

Trout Unlimited has a long history of working collaboratively to support solutions that give everyone a piece of the pie. When the Forest Service first announced it was considering changes to the Roadless Rule in Alaska, Trout Unlimited was among a group of businesses and organizations that reached out to the Forest Service and State of Alaska expressing interest in finding a compromise that retained the core conservation principles of the Roadless Rule while alleviating concerns of its critics, whether real or imagined. Although the Forest Service has made clear that all 58 projects proposed in roadless areas in Alaska have been approved — including mining, energy

and community infrastructure projects — we were and are open to seeing if there is a way to make this process better. Unfortunately, it quickly became apparent the old-growth logging industry would accept nothing less than the most extreme option of fully repealing the Roadless Rule on the Tongass. Logging special interests were not satisfied taking one more piece of the pie. They wanted the whole thing.

Roadless areas are some of the most culturally important and economically productive lands on the forest. They are the bread and butter for numerous businesses in the guiding and tourism industries, and the basis for commercial salmon fisheries. The Tongass is our national forest. It is far past time we move on from outdated ways of thinking and embrace a future with the full economic and cultural benefits of a healthy Tongass.

The Forest Service is accepting comments on the Roadless Rule through Dec. 17.

Austin Williams is the Alaska Director of Law and Policy for Trout Unlimited-Alaska. He has worked on the Tongass for nearly a decade and worked with a network of local supporters and business partners to promote sound management of the Tongass.

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Full chest freezers need Roadless Rule

By KEVIN MAIER

As the fall harvest season comes to a close, it's time for our annual reorganization of the chest freezer. As I donned insulated gloves and moved the oldest vacuum-sealed packages to the top last night, I was struck by how much of what my family eats comes from our backyard. There's a section for deer (that still has some space!), another for salmon (both fresh and smoked), another for ducks and grouse. We are lucky to have a few exotics in there this year — my son got a caribou up North, as well as some partridge from a hunt in the Lower 48 — but year-in and year-out, we eat wild food from the Tongass National Forest. It's literally who we are.

As a chorus of voices from Southeast Alaska has stated in these pages since the U.S. Forest Service proposed exempting Alaska from the Roadless Rule earlier this fall, the rule has helped conserve key areas of the Tongass from the predictable impacts of

industrial old-growth logging, in the process supporting healthy habitat for the deer, fish and birds that we put on the table.

Given the ubiquity of similarly filled chest freezers, it's not surprising that most Southeast Alaskans think the Roadless Rule is working.

Commercial fishing groups have come out in force against the proposed rollback. Regional tribal groups, representing those who have been living off this land since time immemorial, have voiced strong opposition. The tourism industry has been outspoken; city assemblies are chiming in to let everyone know they think the Roadless Rule is working. Even longtime Forest Service leaders have proclaimed the rule to be effective. Save for the handful of employees of the last surviving old-growth timber mill in the region, almost everyone agrees the Roadless Rule is working.

As others have stated so clearly, the trees — like us, literally made of salmon — are far more valuable as a cornerstone link in an ecosystem than the forest products that could be harvested.

It's working because the rule not only protects the fish and wildlife we rely on to feed our families in Southeast, but it also was set up in a reasonable way to allow our communities to conduct the development activities we need. Small hydro-projects, roads to connect villages to regional electrical grids, small timber sales, mining exploration projects — all are totally possible under the current Roadless Rule. In fact, every single one of the 58 proposed exemptions to the rule for similar projects has been permitted. What isn't possible under the current rule is industrial-scale clearcut logging

here in our temperate rainfor-

est with tremendous financial inputs from taxpayers like you and me. (Taxpayers for Common Sense estimates that we subsidized the Tongass timber program in excess of \$30 million per year or over \$600 million over the past 20 years).

While I believe sustainable timber harvest is not only possible but necessary for the Tongass, the roll back of the Roadless Rule does not mark a path toward this important goal.

As others have stated so clearly, the trees — like us, literally made of salmon — are far more valuable as a cornerstone link in an ecosystem than the forest products that could be harvested.

So I hope you take the time to comment on the USFS's proposal sometime before the fast-approaching Dec. 17 deadline, letting them know you support the no-action alternative. No action on the Roadless Rule is the best action for family chest freezers throughout the region.

• Kevin Maier is raising two outdoor-loving boys in Juneau.