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Organization:

Title:

Comments: Withdrawal of Tongass Roadless Protection is Ecological Madness

Dear U.S. Forest Service,

I implore you to reject the request from the Alaska state government to nullify the vital protections for roadless areas in the Tongass National Forest. Eighteen years ago, the Forest Service came to the long-overdue but morally obvious conclusion that all remaining roadless forests are precious beyond economic measure, and that their highest and best use is to remain biologically intact. Since then, intact virgin forests have only become scarcer, both nationally and in the Tongass, and the moral case for their protection has only become stronger. For the Forest Service to even momentarily entertain this astoundingly selfish request from the Alaska state government is a gross abdication of your responsibility to the public interest.

These roadless forests are national treasures, whose biological value vastly outweighs the value of any timber that will be extracted from it. This exchange of an immensely verdant, kaleidoscopic biological treasure for a low-value commodity of lumber pulp is the most lopsided, unholy transfiguration of treasure to commodity, that a myopic human conscience has ever undertaken. It is heartbreaking to see the Forest Service, after making its belated transition toward an ecologically sustainable management model, regress to the status of on-call service providers to the highly subsidized local timber racket. The Tongass is once again being subordinated, by transparently corrupt political authorities in Washington, to the parochial demands of local politicians who direct this mercantilist arrangement. The Forest Service's statutorily and morally demanded service to the public interest is being cynically discarded.

For decades, the Tongass staff managed its writ as a private lumber and pulp fiefdom for a handful of timber mills, supporting economically marginal operations. An unfathomably verdant and sublime national treasure was liquidated for the petty, subsidized self-engorgement of a handful of mill owners and a small employment cohort, even by rural standards. The Tongass was treated as a world apart from the expectations of morally sane management that Americans demanded of the Forest Service in the continental US. Mercifully, the 2000 Roadless Area Protection Rule brought a cease-fire upon America's only temperate rainforest, in recognition of the immense biological value that had been concealed and ignored by local interests. The Federal Register notice for this NOI states,

"The Department and Forest Service believe that current timber harvest and road construction/reconstruction restrictions can be adjusted for the Tongass National Forest in a manner that meaningfully addresses local economic and development concerns while balancing roadless area conservation needs."

This is patent nonsense that requires willful blindness, both to the plight of the Tongass forest ecosystem, and to the minuscule economic benefit from reinstating the roadless, old-growth logging program of the Forest Service's sordid past. The salmon fisheries alone, sustained by the spawning and natal grounds of the Tongass's clear, oxygen-saturated streams, exceed the pathetic commodity value of any lumber or pulp that could be ripped from it. There exists no remotely conceivable cost-benefit analysis, by which further bulldozing and logging of the

Tongass's roadless forests could yield a net benefit even to Alaska, much less to the cumulative American interest, on whose behalf the Forest Service ostensibly is employed.

Sincerely,

Jim Steitz

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