

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 12/17/2019 9:00:00 AM

First name: Robert

Last name: Speed

Organization:

Title:

Comments: The Tongass and the Alaska Roadless Rule

I was the Ketchikan Daily News reporter covering the Tongass and the industries making up the Southeast Alaska economy during the time that the Alaska wilderness issue was being discussed across the country, when scores of bills had been generated in Congress, and congressional committees were crossing the country seeking comment.

I was a recently graduated journalist, and this was my first experience in Alaska, and a rich opportunity it was.

My true education started during the commercial salmon fishing season in the summer of 1976. What I found walking the docks were row after row of salmon seiners tied up to the dock for half the summer, frustrated crews drinking coffee in the boathouses as days ticked on because there weren't enough fish to catch.

Alaska Fish and Game's wise policy was not to allow commercial fishing until enough salmon of each species had escaped upstream to spawn; problem was, fish weren't arriving at river mouths in quantities large enough to meet that need, which would ensure salmon laid and fertilized enough eggs to ensure the next generation was big enough to allow for future runs.

Salmon runs throughout Alaska were at historic low levels at this time; in Northern Alaska, the 1964 Alaska Earthquake was a large part of the reason that salmon rivers and streams were so clogged with trees, boulders and debris from earthquake induced landslides and flooding; rushing mud had covered salmon spawning beds used by salmon for centuries.

The earthquake did little damage in Southeast Alaska where the Tongass National Forest is located. There was only one reason salmon streams were destroyed in Southeast and the Tongass, and it was logging.

Logging practices managed by the Department of Agriculture were so abysmal that it was common practice to use salmon streams as roads for tractors pulling great loads of logs cut from streamside, destroying and silting the gravel spawning beds salmon need to fertilize and hide their eggs.

The same would be true today under the management style of the Trump administration, which basically is rape, ruin and run.

The best stands of healthy old growth trees lie along the streambeds. Forest Service research, much of it done starting in the 1970s after the Environmental Protection Act was passed, put healthy trees that timber companies want the most at about 25 percent of the trees in the forest. A large part of the remainder is poor quality and rotting trees, much less valuable as timber, but still having value as pulpwood for making paper and other products.

Problem is, the 25 percent the loggers want the most because of the quality of the wood lies pretty much on either sides of salmon streams. The streams allow for easy access, allowing large logging equipment into the areas of Big Timber, and acting as logging roads to get the trees to tidewater.

Of all the mainland and the 300-mile-long group of 1100 islands of the Alexander Archipelago that make up the 16 million acres of the Tongass, the most heavily logged island during that time was Prince of Wales. Prince of Wales Island was pretty much designated a sacrifice zone where most of the commercial and Alaska Native

logging took place.

Today, the island holds less than 5 percent of the loggable trees that once stood on the island, most of which were saved because they had spiritual meaning to the Native people of the region, or recreational value including hiking, boating and sportfishing. And there are people who will fight for them.

There are so few stands remaining, all valued for purposes other than cutting all the remaining trees, yet it is exactly these areas targeted by Trump's ill-guided plan (to the extent that the word "plan" means anything to people in the Trump administration).

During the entire time logging took place in the Tongass, there was constant political battle against the loggers conducted by commercial fishermen, Alaska Natives and environmentalists, all working together, largely allied to protect the most important natural resource of the Tongass, the fisheries and other seafood and game dependent upon verdant forests.

Logging was always dependent upon large subsidies by the federal government, because even with the quality of the wood, the profit margin was really small. Logging was pushed after World War II partly to establish a resident population large enough to protect the area if another war threatened the area; this because two tiny Aleutian islands a thousand miles away were attacked and occupied by the Japanese for part of the Pacific war.

The feds subsidized construction of two large pulp mills, one in Sitka and the other in Ketchikan within the Tongass, built specifically to process all that poor-quality timber not good enough making board. Owners of both mills teetered on the high wire of profitability, constantly trying to get protection against environmental regulations, including land protection and air and water pollution law, always crying poverty.

Those mills don't exist anymore, and they're not going to be replaced. One of them was under Japanese ownership, which seemed to fly in the face of the defense reason the mills were built in the first place, and they literally didn't give a damn about the environment, just get the timber and get out.

Trying to reinvent the logging industry that barely survived financially 50 years ago under heavy subsidy is the wet dream of some sleeping teenager who doesn't understand how the defense-bound economy of the 1960s cannot be reproduced now, nor does talking about it make any practical sense.

Just like Trump's dream of recreating the coal industry that existed during his childhood, his brain freeze of trying to recreate a productive timber industry in Alaska will not come to fruition. Leave Alaska's most productive industry, seafood, alone.

Robert J. Speed

Bob Speed, a graduate of Huxley College at WWU in Washington, won a national public service award from the Associated Press Managing Editors Association during his time as a reporter for the Ketchikan Daily News. He later worked for both the Alaska and Washington legislatures, and received a Master of Public Administration degree from Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. He has been a licensed insurance agent for 20 years.

[Position]