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Comments: As someone deeply connected to the lands and waters of Southeast Alaska, I am compelled to speak up for the protection of the Tongass National Forest and its irreplaceable old-growth stands. These ancient trees are not just part of the landscape-they are a living legacy, vital to the health and identity of our communities and the ecological balance of the region.

Old-growth forests are the heart of the Tongass, supporting diverse ecosystems and the cultural lifeways of the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian peoples. These trees have stood for centuries, weathering storms and witnessing the passage of generations. They are more than just resources; they are sacred, living beings that sustain us all.

The preferred alternative in the Draft EIS, while a step forward, still falls short of what is needed to truly protect these ancient forests. Ambiguous language around allowable logging leaves too much room for exploitation. Clear and firm protections are essential to ensure that these trees remain standing for future generations to benefit from and be inspired by.

For the Tlingit people and many others, the Tongass is a source of nourishment, both physical and spiritual. It provides habitat for all five species of Pacific salmon, whose life cycles are intricately tied to the health of these forests. It supports deer, bears, and countless other species, creating a rich tapestry of life that cannot be replaced if lost.

We cannot afford to compromise on the protection of the Tongass. Large-scale commercial logging not only threatens wildlife but also erodes the cultural practices that are central to our way of life. Hunting, fishing, and gathering are more than activities-they are connections to our ancestors and responsibilities to our future generations.

The Tongass is also a powerful ally in the fight against climate change. Its old-growth stands store more carbon per acre than almost any other forest on Earth. Protecting these trees is one of the most effective actions we can take to combat the climate crisis and ensure a livable planet for our children and grandchildren.

I urge the USDA to strengthen the final rule by eliminating loopholes and adopting clear language that unequivocally protects all remaining old-growth in the Tongass. These trees are our heritage and our hope. Let's honor them with the full protections they deserve.

Thank you for considering my comment and for your efforts to safeguard these invaluable forests.