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Organization: Southeast Alaska Conservation Council

Title: Federal Campaigns Manager

Comments: 45-Day Comment Period Extension Request re: Draft Assessment of the Tongass National Forest Land Management Plan #64039 Dear Ms. Mathews, On behalf of Defenders of Wildlife, Center for Biological Diversity, Southeast Alaska Conservation Council - SEACC, The Wilderness Society, Sierra Club, Earth Justice, Alaska Wilderness League, Natural Resources Defense Council, and Women's Earth and Climate Action Network, and our millions of members and supporters, we respectfully request a 45-day extension of the public comment period to 90 days for the Draft Assessment of the Tongass National Forest Management Plan. 1 The assessment is a crucial step in the forest plan revision process, as it provides the baseline of existing ecological, economic, and social conditions and trends on the forest; the assessment must be informed by the best available science. The assessment will inform development of the new forest plan, which will ultimately provide guidance for decision making across the entire Tongass Forest for at least the next 15 years. The rules that govern forest planning make strong commitments to involve the public throughout the planning process. This is the first time the public is seeing these critical, technical, and lengthy draft assessment reports, comprising 21 sections and spanning 8261 The Assessment Phase of Revision of the Land Management Plan for the Tongass National Forest originally noticed by the U.S. Forest Service under document: 2024 -08957 (89 FR 32393, Jan. 10, 2024); see also <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2024/04/26/2024-08957/tongass-national-forest-alaska-assessment-phase-of-revision-of-the-land-management-plan-for-the-2pages>. The current 45-day comment period for the Draft Assessment is not enough time for the public to meaningfully review and engage at this important stage. In the ongoing Blue Mountains Forest Plan Revision process, the Forest Service recently provided a 60-day comment period on the Draft Assessment reports published in spring 2024. 2 The Tongass is the largest national forest in the U.S., at 17 million acres, whereas the Blue Mountains National Forest, by comparison, is only 5.5 million acres. The Blue Mountains Draft Assessment reports totaled 752 pages and Tongass reports comprise 826 pages. A 90-day public comment period is appropriate and necessary for the Tongass Draft Assessment considering the significance of the assessment to the forest planning process on the nation's largest national forest. The public and our members need ample time to review the extensive Draft Assessment in order to fully comment on the high-level concepts and statements as well as identify any factual corrections, supplemental data sources, and necessary additions. For these reasons, and to ensure the public has the best opportunity to meaningfully engage in the planning process and develop thoughtful comments for the Tongass Forest Plan Assessment, we request a 45-day comment period extension of the current 45-day comment period, with a new deadline of until April 10, 2025. Thank you for your consideration. Sincerely, Nathan Newcomer Federal Campaigns Manager