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Comments: My name is Lance Preston. I am writing today to share my thoughts and feedback on the 2025 Draft assessment for the Tongass Forest Revision process.

The Tongass is a salmon forest that provides me a livelihood as a commercial salmon troller, and a wilderness drawing hundreds of thousands of tourists.

The purpose of this assessment is to tell the story of where we are now, so that we can figure out what needs to change in the new plan. The agency has heard the priorities of Southeast Alaska communities through extensive outreach and engagement processes over the past 6 years. The 2025 Draft Assessment should accurately reflect Southeast Alaskans priorities: protecting the functioning ecosystems of the Tongass National Forest, working collaboratively and towards co-stewardship with tribal governments and local communities, prioritizing subsistence harvesting, and investing in a more diversified economy that includes large and small-scale tourism, commercial and sports fishing, and recreation. These are the priorities that should define the need for change.

As we continue through this assessment phase, I want to re-emphasize the priorities that are especially important to me. I think that the current forest plan does not adequately address these priorities and needs to be updated accordingly. These priorities are widely held by Southeast Alaskans and should be reflected in the need for change.

The new Forest Plan should recognize the Tongass as the traditional homelands of the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian peoples who have lived here since time immemorial. Subsistence, harvesting wild foods, traditional uses, and food security are the highest priorities for many people on the Tongass, and the Forest should be managed accordingly. I would like to see the Forest Service focus on uplifting local workforce development, partnering with local entities and Tribes, and drive their forest management by community priorities. The Tongass should be managed to prioritize healthy salmon habitat and salmon-producing watersheds and have 300 stream buffers. The Tongass should be evaluated for its benefits as a carbon sink, while still allowing for sustainable use of the forest by local peoples for recreation, subsistence, cultural use, and more. The Forest Plan should seek a balance in creating opportunities for sustainable small-scale tourism, and protecting local priority areas from overuse. Climate change is a top community concern across the region, and the role that the forest plays in adaptation and mitigation needs to be considered throughout the Forest Plan. The USDA should protect old growth forests for climate mitigation, salmon and deer habitat, and also provide pathways for traditional and cultural use of forest species like red and yellow cedar.

One thing that I believe is missing from the Draft Assessment as it is currently written is the focus on salmon as a keystone species. The Aquatic Ecosystems section in particular does not adequately document the social, economic, and cultural importance of salmon in the region. Across rural Southeast Alaska, residents use an average of 75 pounds of salmon per person each year, and nearly 90% of rural households here use salmon. Commercial salmon fishing in Southeast Alaska supports a global economy and food chain and employs 15% of Southeast Alaskans, more than any other private sector. For myself and other Southeast Alaskans, salmon represent more than food: they represent a way of life that is tied to our ways of life and our economies. Sitka and most SE Alaska communities rely heavily on salmon for their economic wellbeing, whether from commercial fisheries or from the tourist sport sector. Most SE Alaskans also rely on salmon as a source of protein.

I am grateful that the Forest Service is investing in creating a more holistic Forest Plan with community-driven feedback. I am also glad that the Forest Service is bringing in extra resources to support tribal engagement.

Look around the world. Almost all wild ecosystems are threatened. Forests are dangerously shrinking everywhere. The Tongass is an outstanding gem, a regional economic engine and a globally important carbon sink as long as it is protected. Short term profits from its destruction would be a long term loss for the regional economy and for the nations public.

Thank you for considering my input and the input of Southeast Alaskan communities during this important process.