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

In Hoonah, I depend on the Tongass for harvesting wild food and hunting. But as a teacher, I also value the Tongass for education, and being able to visit and take young people outside.

I hope that the plan will share these priorities:

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.

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 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.

The Tongass should be managed to prioritize healthy salmon habitat and salmon-producing watersheds and have 300 stream buffers.

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. I want to see traditional ecological knowledge and indigenous values incorporated into the Forest Plan.

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. Salmon are the foundation of our diet, and of everything else in the ecosystem that we eat. We live in a remote village at the far end of the supply chain. If the salmon population crashes, our own food and economic security crashes with it, and we are vulnerable depending on expensive, imported, unreliable food and resources.

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.

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