

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 2/20/2025 9:00:00 AM

First name: Willa

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Organization:

Title:

Comments: Dear Tongass Forest Plan Revision Assessment Team,

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

The Tongass and Southeast Alaska is my home. I recreate, including taking walks and hikes for exercise in the forest. I also harvest food from the Tongass that makes up a significant portion of my diet which makes it really important to preserve and protect this pristine environment. I harvest mushrooms and deer and salmon who spawn in streams in the Tongass. Additionally I enjoy visiting Forest Service cabins in the Tongass which provide an affordable vacation opportunity for me.

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. 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 Forest Service should prioritize opportunities for outdoor recreation on the Tongass. 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 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 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 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. 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 critically important to me and my community here in Sitka. Salmon harvested on the Tongass, in particular at Redoubt lake is important for my own health and food security. Between salmon and venison, at least 1/3 of the protein I eat each week comes directly from the Tongass. Maintaining critical fish habitat that is present in the Tongass is also important for the many commercial fisheries that are the backbone of the economy here in Southeast Alaska. These fisheries provide people all around the world with healthy and delicious fish to eat.

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.

Regards,
Willa Johnson