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The Tongass: A Forest of Salmon



Forest of stumps or a forest of salmon?



Tracy Sylvester and skipper Marty Remund fishing black cod – and rockfish.

The mystique of an Alaska rainforest and its prolific salmon runs lured New Englander Tracy Sylvester to a job blowing up roads in the Tongass National Forest.

As a U.S. Forest Service intern, Sylvester worked on a blasting crew that took out abandoned logging roads and old culverts blocking the passage of wild salmon.

“I spent the summer setting off explosives and shoveling dirt. It was fun,” said Sylvester, 27, who has a bachelor’s degree in fisheries biology.

Most of the work took place on Baranof Island in Southeast Alaska’s bear- and salmon-rich Tongass rain forest, a 17-million-acre expanse of giant spruce, hemlock, and cedar trees nestled against northern British Columbia. Commercial, sport, and subsistence fishing, along with government and tourism jobs, fuel the regional economy.

Timber once dominated both the economy and the headlines. But the industry is much smaller now, the controversy around logging less heated, and mill owners are preparing to retool from old to young-growth harvest and manufacture.

Sylvester’s college intern work that summer in 2007 – decommissioning logging roads and restoring logged watersheds – is part of a transition sweeping the Tongass. Charged with overseeing the Tongass, the U.S. Forest Service is moving away from managing the country’s largest national forest for industrial

logging to a future that's focused more around niche timber sales, forest stewardship and restoration, and fisheries, particularly salmon.

"It's becoming a greater priority for a couple of reasons," said Wayne Owen, a top-level Forest Service official based in Juneau. "I think the nature of the forest products industry is changing, and that certainly contributes to it. I also think the voice of the people with respect to salmon

is being heard more clearly locally, regionally, and nationally, and that makes a difference, especially when people work with the Forest Service, when you have that spirit of cooperative engagement."

Besides supporting small-boat fishermen and family businesses, the Forest Service also is trying to stimulate other emerging industries such as mariculture, alternative energy, and visitor services.

The agency's Tongass transition coincides with Sylvester's own. Before trading the

East Coast for Alaska, the Massachusetts native worked at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's laboratory in Woods Hole, Mass., commuting an hour and a half each way. While she enjoyed the work, Sylvester found she wanted more time outdoors, particularly on the water,

and fewer hours stuck in traffic.

After returning to Southeast Alaska, Sylvester found work as a deckhand aboard a long-liner out of Sitka. Through a mutual

friend, Sitka troller Marsh Skeele, she met a second-generation Southeast Alaska commercial fisherman, Jesse Remund.

These days, Sylvester and Remund are expecting a baby and are gearing up to purchase a power troller. They plan to directly market Tongass salmon from a company they'll base out of Port Alexander, a tiny fishing town on the southern tip of Baranof Island, where Remund grew up.

"We're excited to be able to take our

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'Everyone in Southeast Alaska, it seems, engages in some sort of salmon fishing or knows someone who does.'

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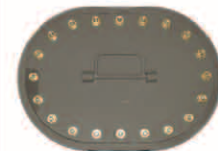
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daughter out commercial fishing when she's old enough and to teach her all about how to harvest wild food from the Tongass," Sylvester said.

A forest of fish: Alaska remains the proverbial land of opportunity where people can reinvent themselves, as Sylvester and so many others have done. It stems from the vast landscape, the tiny population, and the slower pace of day-to-day life. But it also has to do with salmon, the iconic species synonymous with the state.

For people who grow up or come to live here, it's easy to become obsessed with salmon, as they pervade so many aspects of daily life. Everyone in Southeast Alaska, it seems, engages in some sort of salmon fishing or knows someone who does.

"I threw out one career and started another one," said Lou Barr, a former federal fisheries biologist.

Barr, who lives in Auke Bay outside Juneau, crewed for a summer back in 1979. A diver who has always been drawn to the ocean, Barr quit his federal job in 1980 to work as a commercial salmon troller. He's never looked back.

"I was just fascinated by it," Barr said. "I love to do things independently, and trolling was the answer to that. It's a fishery where you can pretty much take off and go."

A far-flung region of coastal mountains, islands, and lush forest, Southeast Alaska spans about 500 miles from Dixon Entrance in the south to Yakutat on the northern boundary. The Tongass covers about 94 percent of Southeast Alaska's panhandle, known as the Alexander Archipelago. With more than 17,000 miles of salmon-bearing rivers and creeks, it's hard to go anywhere in the Tongass



Lou Barr and his F/V Gavia



during the summer without seeing or smelling salmon. They jump through saltwater, navigate lakes and rivers, and rot on beaches and riverbanks after spawning. Transported by eagles, bears, and other animals, their carcasses journey back to the forest and nourish the entire ecosystem.

What the region's small population and lack of roads and major development means is this: Southeast Alaska remains much the way nature made it — rich in wildlife and healthy runs of salmon, trout, steelhead, and other fish.

Although it comprises only about 5 percent of Alaska in terms of land area, Southeast is extremely productive when it comes to fish — especially salmon. Federal and state biologists carefully monitor how many salmon return to spawn and how many get caught. And every year, despite natural fluctuations, Southeast Alaska delivers a salmon bounty.

"Going back through the records kept by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game dating to 1994, we've documented that the Tongass National Forest produces 28 percent of the average state-wide salmon harvest annually. That's about 48 million of the 172 million salmon harvested by commercial fishermen every year," said Ron Medel, fisheries program manager with the Forest Service in Ketchikan.

About one-quarter of the Pacific West Coast salmon harvest originates in the Tongass, and of all salmon harvested from national forests, the Tongass produces about 70 percent, according to Medel.

"I think the term 'salmon forest' as it applies to the Tongass is a point of pride for most Forest Service employees in Alaska," said Owen, director of wildlife, fisheries, ecology, watersheds, and subsistence for the Forest Service's Alaska Region.

Owen noted the Tongass is a forest of multiple uses so "there's always a little bit of tenderness" about labeling it as just one thing. "But I think we who work here like the idea of 'salmon forest' being one of the ways to describe the Tongass," Owen said.

Money: In 2012, Southeast Alaska enjoyed a more profitable salmon harvest than any other region of the state. ADF&G officials said the dockside value of Southeast Alaska's commercial salmon harvest totaled \$153.2 million. Bristol Bay came in second with an ex-vessel value of \$121 million. Prince William Sound ranked third

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Not all fishing wealth comes in the form of salmon. Here, the crew of the F/V Infinite Grace make a set near Siginaka Islands during the Sitka herring fishery this year. Rafe Hanson photo

at \$110.8 million.

The year before was record-breaking for Southeast Alaska. Fish and Game officials put the value of Southeast Alaska's overall salmon harvest in 2011 at more than \$203 million, the highest since statehood. Southeast also was the state's most productive region in terms of number and weight of salmon caught in 2011. That year, Southeast fishermen hauled in 73.5 million fish, weighing 324.5 million pounds, according to ADF&G. Even in years when prices or returns are lower, salmon remain a linchpin of the regional economy.

According to a Forest Service fact sheet, one in 10 jobs in Southeast is tied to salmon. That represents close to 7,300 people. The combined economic impact of commercial, sport, and subsistence salmon fishing, as well as hatchery operations, was estimated at \$986 million for 2007, according to the agency. Southeast also has the largest seafood industry workforce in the state. In 2009, Southeast had a seafood industry workforce of 10,150. The Aleutians and Pribilofs came in second with a workforce of 5,309. Bristol Bay, Southcentral, and Kodiak followed, in that order.

"I like to tell people that Southeast Alaska is the fish basket of North America," said Owen.

One fish at a time: Although Tongass salmon face threats from farmed salmon, climate change, land privatization initiatives, as well as mineral development and timber harvest, the future overall seems quite positive for the industry.

In a presentation to the Alaska House Fisheries Committee in February, economist Gunnar Knapp cited several reasons for optimism. Global demand for salmon has expanded dramatically in recent years through the development of new markets like Brazil and

China. There has been a slew of new products developed, which have boosted sales, and consumers are becoming more familiar with the health benefits of salmon.

That said, many factors could affect the state's salmon markets, including harvest levels, foreign exchange rates, farmed salmon market conditions, and visa rules for foreign seafood workers in Alaska.

But overall, at least in the short term, the market outlook for Alaska salmon looks positive. And so Southeast Alaska commercial salmon fishermen are well-positioned to parlay their catch into profitable businesses.

Besides knowing where the fish are, and successfully catching and handling them, a key part of a successful salmon venture comes down to marketing — selling the story of why Tongass-caught wild salmon are superior to the competition.

Unlike other coastal regions of Alaska that have established regional seafood marketing and development associations, such as Copper River/Prince William Sound, Bristol Bay, and Alaska Peninsula/Aleutians, Southeast Alaska lacks such a group. Regional fishermen have twice rejected the option of imposing a self-assessed tax to fund a seafood marketing and development group.

So fishermen use various tactics to capture market share on their own. Some use the story of the Tongass rainforest with its pristine waters as a selling point in their promotional material and websites. They focus on the big watersheds of ancient trees that provide forest nurseries for young salmon.

Others focus on ocean conditions and the "one fish at a time" approach of small-boat fishing.

"We sell sustainably harvested salmon from the wilderness

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waters of the Gulf of Alaska. Our fish are gently harvested one at a time by hand out on the ocean, where the salmon are in prime condition," write Mark Stopha and Sara Hannan, owners of The Alaska Wild Salm-

on Company of Juneau, on their website.

The Seafood Producers Cooperative, one of the largest handlers of wild salmon in Southeast, adopts a similar approach.

"Our team of over 500 premier hook and

line fishermen troll the icy-cold, pristine waters of Alaska, harvesting their catch in the open ocean at their peak of quality — one fish at a time," the cooperative's website declares.

Absolute Fresh Seafoods, located in Sitka, also markets itself as a place where local waters produce the highest-quality fish.

"The fishing boats ply the icy, crystal-clear waters of Southeast Alaska where some of the finest king and coho salmon in the world are caught one at a time, cleaned and iced immediately to maintain their flavor and texture," the Absolute Fresh Seafood's website touts.

Some seafood advocates say fishermen and government agencies who work with them could do more to promote the Tongass salmon story.

"People are fascinated by the story of how these fish come from a North American rainforest and go out to sea for a period of their life, and manage to find their way back to the very stream where they were born," said Andrew Thoms, executive director of the Sitka Conservation Society.

"We could capitalize on this story a lot more. All around the world people are more and more interested in knowing where their food and beverages come from. They'll buy their wine from the Napa Valley or from Washington state because they know it'll taste a certain way. It's the same with salmon. Nowhere else in the world do we have salmon that come from an American rainforest, at least not in these numbers."

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Knowing your fish: The growing “locavore,” or “know your food,” movement across the United States bodes well for Tongass salmon, several direct marketers said. Restaurateurs and chefs like to be able to tell customers exactly where their salmon comes from and who harvested it and to provide assurances that the product is wild and sustainably harvested.

The demand for traceability, particularly in seafood, is huge, and Alaska’s commercial fishermen can capitalize on this growing trend, said Tyson Fick, communications director for the Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute.

“There’s a ton of growth potential,” said Thoms of the Sitka Society. “The sea-to-table movement is big. And besides great habitat, abundant stocks, and well-regulated fisheries, we have another major thing going for us in Southeast Alaska: tourism. One million visitors come to Southeast Alaska every year. These people are tired of hearing about environmental degradation around the planet. They come here and they love hearing about the success of our sustainable salmon fisheries. It’s a selling point for us.”

Sylvester, the former Woods Hole Lab employee, learned first-hand working in a seafood restaurant on Cape Cod how

It was eye-opening for Sylvester to discover how many people didn’t know anything about the salmon life cycle, how they spend their formative years in freshwater before moving to the ocean to mature, and then return to their natal streams to spawn and die.

“Many consumers lack an understanding of the basic biology of salmon, so it’s easy for them to be fooled by the farmed salmon story.

“There’s a lot of opportunity for public education and marketing about the health of Southeast salmon and the unique forest

from which they come,” she said.

A lifestyle choice: Barr, the former fisheries biologist, is less interested in marketing than he is in simply being on the water, making a living harvesting salmon.

“I’ve never been one to excel as one of the real highliners. I wasn’t that hungry. There have been times when I’ve quit fishing even though it was one of the most productive days. If I was getting too far behind in cleaning and icing, I’d just stop and get caught up,” said Barr.

Moving from the security of a federal

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‘Nowhere else in the world do we have salmon that come from an American rainforest, at least not in these numbers.’

hungry people are for information about where their fish comes from and whether it’s a sustainable product.

They often don’t know whether it’s better to buy farmed Atlantic salmon or Pacific wild salmon from Alaska. When she spoke to them about the environmental trade-offs of farmed salmon, sometimes they got it. But what really sunk in was when Sylvester identified herself as someone with first-hand experience commercial fishing in Southeast Alaska. When she told customers about how tightly managed and healthy salmon are in Southeast Alaska, and why they taste better, she could see the light bulbs going on in their heads.

“Then everything I said was like gospel,” she said.



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job at the Auke Bay Fisheries Laboratory to the unpredictability of commercial fishing may seem an unlikely career choice for many. But Barr said he's always felt an affinity for the ocean and for fish.

"My work at the lab was becoming more of a desk job, and that didn't fit me. With my background as a biologist, I get a lot more pleasure being out on the water than I do in killing fish."

'One million visitors come to Southeast Alaska every year. These people are tired of hearing about environmental degradation around the planet. They come here and they love hearing about the success of our sustainable salmon fisheries. It's a selling point for us!'

Nancy Barr describes her husband's transition as a lifestyle choice, one that she supports.

"It's been a bit of an up and down ride financially. But I've always worked and when he said he wanted to do it, I said 'Go for it.'" ↓

Freelance writer Paula Dobbryn lives in Anchorage. She also works for Trout Unlimited and teaches journalism at the University of Alaska Anchorage.



Jev Shelton aboard his gillnetter

The Tongass 77 campaign and why you should support it

Most of us who harvest salmon for a living realize our livelihoods depend directly on healthy freshwater.

Wild salmon populations in Washington and Oregon, and their respective fisheries, are shadows of their historical levels, not from overfishing but from the systematic loss of freshwater habitat. By comparison, Southeast Alaska's habitat remains largely intact and productive.

For this, we are fortunate. But we cannot afford to ignore past habitat damage or existing pressures involving land privatization, mining, and logging. That is why commercial fishermen should support the Tongass 77, a proposal that would set aside some of the most biologically rich, but as yet unprotected, salmon systems in this region. If enacted, the Tongass 77 proposal would represent the first action to protect salmon production since passage of the Tongass Timber Reform Act in 1990.

For more than 50 years before the reform act, through subsidized logging and road-building practices, the U.S. Forest Service effectively ignored damage to salmon streams. Seeing the progressive destruction of important salmon habitat, fishermen finally organized an effective voice for their economic interests.

A long, frustrating, but ultimately successful political campaign resulted in adoption of the Tongass Timber Reform Act by Congress. Among the very important provisions of that act are 100-foot no-logging "buffers" along prime salmon-spawning streams and the designation of 12 areas, mostly major salmon-producing drainages, as off-limits to logging.

Those who participated in that struggle recall the attitude that pervaded the Forest Service before and, to a degree, after passage of the reform act. To many in the agency, the economic value of salmon in the Tongass was of no consequence compared to that of forestry values. The Forest Service managed the Tongass as a giant tree farm at that time.

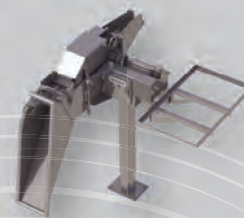
Premier salmon forest: As a veteran of those times, it is encouraging to hear the recent characterization of the Tongass by the Forest Service. Many in the agency now refer to the Tongass as the nation's premier salmon forest.

As a biological matter, that notion is accurate. As an economic

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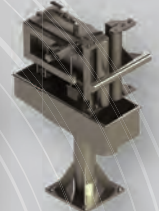
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matter, salmon are among the largest private sources of employment in the Southeast. Still, even with this recognition of the ecological and economic value of Tongass salmon, the Forest Service has yet neither expanded existing protections for salmon production nor developed an assurance that the fishery values will remain a top priority into the future.

That assurance is the point of the Tongass 77. It is a proposal to Congress by commercial, sport, and other fishing advocates, asking that fishery resource values be considered as the top priority of "salmon forest" drainages.

Whole watersheds: It does this by identifying 77 specific watersheds in the Tongass for protection under the same land use designation (LUD II) given the 12 areas protected under the Tongass Timber Reform Act. The 77 systems have been evaluated objectively as providing high-quality fish and wildlife habitat. For the most part, the systems have been chosen because they have avoided significant logging impacts.

Extensive scientific evidence supports this approach to protecting entire watersheds. Sixty of the systems have experienced no commercial logging and, thus, contain extensive old-growth habitat. Importantly, the LUD II land-use designation permits hunting, fishing, other recreation, fishery enhancement, and even hydropower generation and mineral development, provided those activities are compatible with the high fish values.

It does prohibit commercial timber harvest.

For more than 50 years before the reform act, through subsidized logging and road-building practices, the U.S. Forest Service effectively ignored damage to salmon streams.

If this proposal is adopted, these areas will be managed permanently for their most important resource: salmon. The proposed 77 drainages total roughly 1.9 million acres. Southeast's timber industry can continue unhindered, because only 69,500 acres of the existing "timber base" would be protected under Tongass 77. Nearly 470,000 acres would remain in the timber base for the Forest Service to manage for future timber harvests.

Privatization pressures: Currently, there is a bill before Congress that would transfer some 70,000 acres of the Tongass to a private corporation, Sealaska, to settle Native land claims. If passed, this legislation would privatize four of the Tongass 77 watersheds – Nutkwa, Security Bay, Situk, and Union Bay.

This should be a concern for fishermen because of Sealaska's previous logging operations in Southeast Alaska and the fact

that the company is not required to leave 100-foot buffer strips along salmon streams, as mandated for the Tongass by federal law.

Even more troubling is the precedent the Sealaska legislation would set. Because the bill allows Sealaska to select land outside the original boundaries of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, it potentially opens the door for other Native groups also to seek privatization of ecologically important watersheds in the Tongass.

There are five communities within Southeast Alaska with Native groups seeking to establish private corporations endowed with 115,200 acres of the Tongass. These groups are located in Haines, Ketchikan, Petersburg, Tenakee Springs, and Wrangell.

Besides Sealaska and the so-called "landless Natives," other pressures to privatize salmon habitat in the Tongass come from the state of Alaska and the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority.

Gov. Sean Parnell and timber industry supporters are pressing for parts of the Tongass to be transferred to the state for use as a "timber trust." A group established by Parnell, called the "Alaska Timber Jobs Task Force," in October 2012 called for the transfer of some 2 million Tongass acres from federal to state ownership for the purpose of logging and timber production.

As with Sealaska, the logging that would occur in this state timber trust would follow state forestry laws and guidelines, which are less protective for fish than federal standards. Each of these privatization schemes underscores the need to protect the Tongass' best salmon habitat and points to why the Tongass 77 legislation should be enacted.

Why 77? Although the Tongass 77 comprises 1.9 million acres, many salmon-producing watersheds are not included in the proposal. For some of the watersheds that are not part of the Tongass 77, commercial logging is highly unlikely in the foreseeable future. In other cases, streams have not been included due to the lasting impacts on salmon production from prior logging.

On the other hand, some drainages that have been logged still retain high fisheries values, and that's why they're included in the Tongass 77. Under the proposal, the 100-foot buffer strips mandated under the Tongass Timber Reform Act on federal land will continue to apply to all major salmon streams. That protection certainly is helpful and may be sufficient for many systems that are not included in the Tongass 77, although scientists increasingly recognize the need for watershed-scale protection of productive salmon drainages. That additional protection is what the Tongass

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77 would provide in these 77 high-value watersheds.

Attainable: Political reality obviously imposes limits on what can be withdrawn for the benefit of fisheries. At this point, many fish advocates, including myself, view the Tongass 77 selections as reasonable and politically attainable. Knowing well the history of salmon declines due to damage in freshwater habitats, I understand and feel the temptation to reach for maximum protection of our remarkable “salmon base.”

But, to me, that temptation appears to contain a route to more frustration and more inaction. Conditions in place now present an opportunity to improve future prospects for important salmon runs. Overreaching would jeopardize that opportunity.

We have a coherent, specific proposal with solid technical support. We have a core of support from a cross-section of Alaskan fishing interests and, most importantly, a federal agency that for the first time openly recognizes the great importance of fish resources in its management of the Tongass.

The Tongass 77 proposal represents an opportunity to do something meaningful – and do it now.

The political landscape certainly is better than in the recent past, but by no means is it all rosy.

For success, Congress must hear widespread, solid support from the fishing community. Success will not occur if apathy or partisan suspicions among fishing interests dilute the needed political pressure. The Tongass 77 proposal represents an opportunity to do something meaningful – and do it now.

This opportunity likely has a very narrow time window. Translating the Forest Service’s current appreciation for Tongass salmon into lasting habitat protection should be accomplished while the possibility is at hand. Doing so will not end the need to improve salmon habitat protection in Southeast Alaska. But recognizing other long-term needs must not interrupt taking this productive step while it is available. It is absolutely time to ride this tide.

You can learn more about the Tongass 77 at www.americansalmonforest.org. ↴

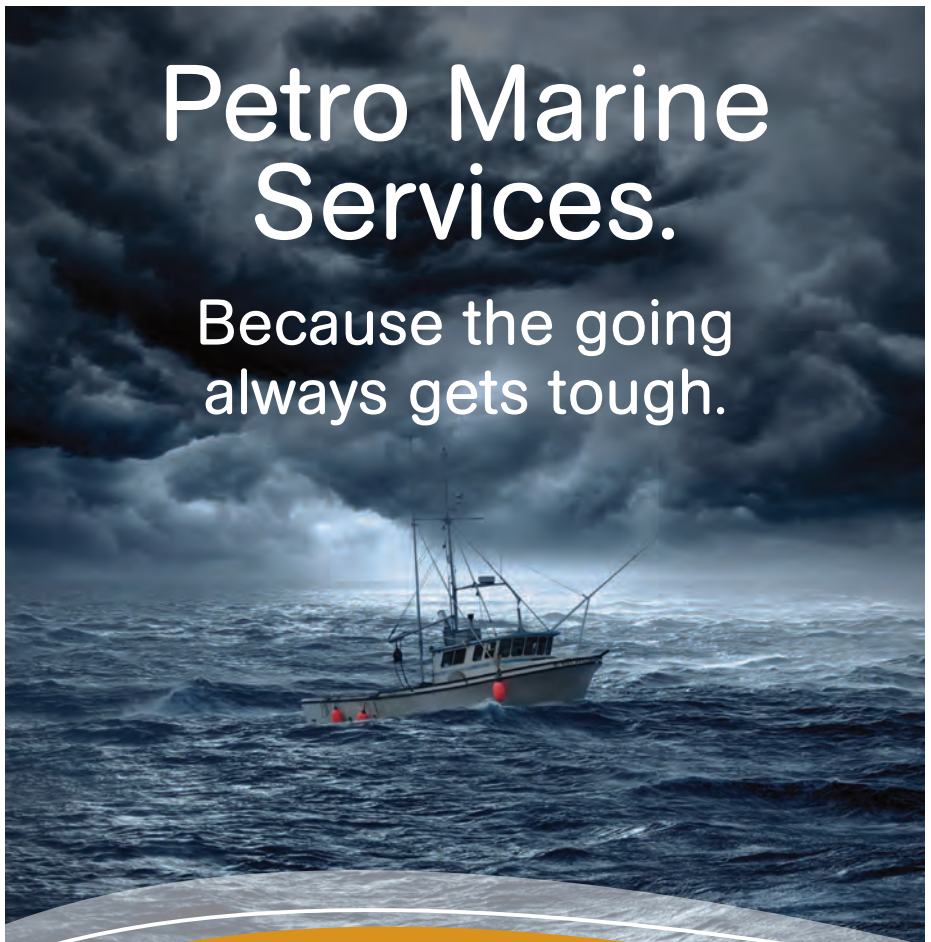
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