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Old growth, new fight: Tongass timber slows forest bill

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Tongass National Forest near Ketchikan, Alaska. Mark Brennan/Wikipedia

The old-growth timber industry's fight for survival in Alaska may be complicating congressional efforts to reach a long-term solution to costly wildfires.

Senate aides and lobbyists told E&E News that Sen. Lisa Murkowski's focus on protecting southeast Alaska's shrinking old-growth timber business is one potential wrinkle as lawmakers balance environmental and forest industry interests in search of a compromise, possibly in a spending bill covering the rest of this fiscal year.

As the Republican chairwoman of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, and often a swing vote on issues in the Senate, Alaska's senior senator is a key player in the wildfire and forest management debate. She told E&E News on Wednesday she's still working toward including a wildfire measure in a broader bill but didn't elaborate.

A wildfire deal could offer Murkowski a way to slow the Forest Service's transition to second-growth timber in the Tongass National Forest — a shift she doubts is economically viable within the 16-year window the agency envisions — and to increase access to parts of the nearly 17-million-acre forest for logging.

She has called for blocking the transition pending a survey of younger-growth trees and for sparing the Tongass from the federal "roadless rule" that limits timber-related road construction in national forests.

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Murkowski, also chairwoman of the Appropriations subcommittee with jurisdiction over Interior and environment agencies, already added a similar provision to a spending bill released last year. The Tongass language may or may not make the final version, likely to be wrapped into an omnibus package covering most federal agencies.

"We must have a comprehensive solution that addresses both wildfire budgeting and forest management," Nicole Daigle, a spokeswoman for the ENR Committee, said in a statement.

"The management problem will not be adequately resolved without attention to our nation's largest national forest, the Tongass, in Southeast Alaska," she said. "We are working toward such a solution with our colleagues in the Senate and the House."

Including the Tongass provision could inflame partisan divisions over forest policy. Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.), whose latest wildfire measure, [S. 1842](#), doesn't include Tongass language, declined Wednesday to comment on that aspect of negotiations. He has supported delaying the old-growth transition in the past as part of a broader forest bill ([E&E Daily](#), May 26, 2016).

For Wyden and many other lawmakers, the top priority is ending the Forest Service's practice of moving money out of nonfire-related accounts to cover rising wildfire costs.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) has joined that cause, saying the so-called fire borrowing takes money away from the fight against the emerald ash borer, which threatens to wipe out ash trees in New York ([E&E News PM](#), Aug. 15, 2016).

Schumer's office didn't immediately return a message seeking comment; a spokesman for Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) said yesterday he didn't have anything to announce yet on an appropriations package.

Wildfire suppression takes up more than half the Forest Service's budget, up from 16 percent in 1995. Wyden's legislation would base annual wildfire funding on a frozen 10-year average of those costs — preventing its climb — while establishing a disaster fund for costs beyond that amount.

"Obviously, we're very involved with the parties, working very closely with Leader Schumer, and he has felt strongly about these issues," Wyden told E&E News.

Old-growth skeptics said they hope Senate leaders steer away from a Tongass fight, figuring it's not worth trying to put in the bill.

Long fight for old growth

"I think it's a pretty big lift," said Niel Lawrence, Alaska director and senior attorney for land and wildlife at the Natural Resources Defense Council.

The argument over the Tongass and old-growth timber has been brewing for years, with the Forest Service aiming for a 16-year transition through a land-use plan amendment approved during the Obama administration.

Timber interests and Murkowski say that's too fast, especially without a complete forest inventory in hand ([E&E Daily](#), March 9, 2016).

Environmental groups and some sustainable forestry advocates say an even faster transition is plausible, perhaps by 2020.

One company — Viking Lumber of Klawock, Alaska — has taken on a visible role in the debate. The last significantly sized mill in southeast Alaska, Viking depends on old-growth logs, its owners have told Congress.

The mill, which employs fewer than 100 people, ran out of logs five times between 2005 and 2015, the company's president, Kirk Dahlstrom, told lawmakers during a hearing in 2015.

Viking and its owners are putting money behind the cause, spending \$34,000 lobbying Congress in 2017, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

An owner, Aleda Dahlstrom, contributed \$1,500 to Murkowski's election campaign in 2016, according to the center, which compiles figures reported to the Federal Election Commission.

In 2016, the company's vice president of transportation and raw materials, Bryce Dahlstrom, [testified](#) to the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands that the mill could run for two more years based on current contracts.

He pleaded with lawmakers not to rush the transition, saying certain goods rely on tight-grained, older-growth trees, and blamed political contributions from environmental groups for pushing policy in an anti-logging direction.

The move to second-growth timber, Dahlstrom said, is "forcing the deprived old-growth industry into either investing upwards of \$60 million to process young-growth before it is viable, or to completely shut down, leaving the Tongass a decaying forest never to be touched."

Dahlstrom didn't return an emailed message seeking comment.

'Would never roll over'

People on the other side of the debate say Murkowski is promoting a part of the timber industry that's bound to fade away and that she should embrace the industry's evolution away from it.

"You can't know till you cut some of it and see what the market's like," said Jim Furnish, a forestry consultant and former deputy chief of the Forest Service who helped write the Roadless Area Conservation Rule — the so-called roadless rule that Murkowski and state officials in Alaska have sought to reverse in the Tongass National Forest.

Murkowski and her staff haven't accepted that argument in meetings, Furnish said. "She just would never roll over on that," he said.

Furnish said mills in other areas have either vanished or retooled to handle smaller logs. Alaska mills' trouble isn't a lack of wood, but a shortage of equipment to take second-growth, he said.

Research funded by the NRDC and the Geos Institute in Oregon suggests younger trees may be more viable than old-growth, advocates say, and can be found in areas that don't need new roads. New small-log processing is readily available for testing on Tongass harvests and can handle logs down to 4 ½ inches in diameter, the NRDC and Geos found in 2016.

Catherine Mater, president of Mater Engineering and a forestry consultant who participated in the study, said her own meetings with mill operators revealed that a significant amount of old growth is discarded for perceived defects, and that second-growth sales produce less waste and have been surprisingly robust in the state.

Stakeholders: Get on with it

People on both sides of the forest management debate say they're growing frustrated with the lack of progress.

"Congress has known since at least 2014 that the Forest Service fire budget process is broken," said Bill Imbergamo, executive director of the Federal Forest Resource Council, representing timber companies.

"A bipartisan package of fire funding and forest management reforms can be easily identified and passed as part of a broader budget agreement — assuming we get one after this ridiculous shutdown. Every stakeholder has had ample time to make their needs known to those who get to vote on these matters. They need to act to fix this problem now," Imbergamo said.

"You have a package that could come together," said Cecilia Clavet, senior policy adviser for forest and wildfire issues at the Nature Conservancy. "The fire funding fix actually helps everyone."

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