

KETCHIKAN DAILY NEWS



44°/39°

Weather, page 3

\$1.00

WEDNESDAY, NOV. 22, 2017

TWITTER.COM/KDNNEWS

WWW.KETCHIKANDAILYNEWS.COM

16 PAGES

Murkowski's draft Interior bill targets Tongass

By SCOTT BOWLEN
Daily News Staff Writer

Timber management in the Tongass National Forest could change substantially if Congress approves legislative language recommended this week by Sen. Lisa Murkowski.

The proposed language would exempt the Tongass and all other national forest land in Alaska from the "Roadless Rule," in addition to preventing an accelerated transition to the young-growth-focused timber sale management program established by the 2016 Tongass Land and Resource

Management Plan Amendment.

Also, the proposed language would require a comprehensive inventory of 360,000 acres of young-growth timber in the Tongass — and require "changes in the management direction of the Tongass National Forest to ensure that any

transition to a timber sale program based primarily on young-growth management be accomplished in a timeframe and in a manner that maintains an economically viable timber industry in Southeast Alaska."

Until the young-growth inventory and other re-

quired analysis and conditions are completed, the Forest Service's timber management program in the 17-million acre Tongass would be conducted under the 2008 Tongass Land and Resource Management Plan rather than the 2016 amended

See 'Tongass,' page 3

plan.

The proposed language was released Monday by Murkowski as part of her recommendations for the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act for fiscal year 2018.

Murkowski is chair of the Senate's Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee, and a senior member of the full Senate Appropriations Committee.

Her draft of the bill serves as the "basis of the subcommittee's appropriations bill negotiations for the new fiscal year," according to an announcement from Murkowski's office.

The final few pages of the 174-page draft appropriations bill focus on the Tongass National Forest. The proposed changes drew starkly different views from a representative of the Alaska timber industry and representatives of environmental organizations.

Alaska Forest Association Executive Director Owen Graham said he'd read through the proposed language on Monday evening. He noted favorably that it would end the current Roadless Rule ban on building new roads in currently unroaded areas within the national forest and ends the current "mandate to cut the young-growth trees before they're mature."

He also appreciates that it would require an "adequate" inventory and analysis of young-growth timber stands.

"It appears to cover everything that we need to restore a timber supply — although it does rely on the Forest Service to cooperate and interpret the language in the way it was intended," Graham said on Tuesday. "But it looks like it does everything we need."

The Ketchikan-based AFA has decried the steady decline in timber volume — especially "economic" volumes — that have been made available from the Tongass since the Tongass Land Management Plan Revision of 1997.

"At the end of 1997, timber under contract was around 498 (million board feet)," stated the AFA's official comments made during an Oct. 30 Forest Service meeting regarding the Wrangell Island timber sale project. "... The timber under contract is now at 78 (million board feet) and the Forest Service is able to sell only 31 (million board feet) this year, and 29 (million board feet) of that was young growth that the local mills cannot utilize."

At present, the existing industry in Southeast Alaska has a few years of timber supply available, according to Graham.

"If nothing goes wrong, we have four or five years of timber for our industry," said Graham, adding that Murkowski's proposed language would be a "good opportunity to restore a long-term timber supply."

"Unless I missed something, this takes care of all of the issues that we took to Sen. Murkowski and this is what we need help with," he said.

However, representatives of environmental groups attacked the proposed language as a return to old-growth logging and a roll-back of the 2016 Tongass plan amendment process that involved years of public participater and stakeholder involvement through the Tongass Advisory Committee.

"The Tongass plan amendment is the product of several years of collaboration by Alaskans from across the political spectrum that were able to overcome their differences and form a shared vision for the Tongass based on tourism, fishing and sustainable young-growth forest products," Austin Williams, the Alaska legal and policy director for Trout Unlimited, said in a prepared statement.

Audubon Alaska Policy Director Susan Culliney said in a prepared statement that while the 2016 TLMP amendment had its flaws, it maintained momentum toward ending old-growth logging in the Tongass.

"Returning to the 2008 plan will be a significant step

backward in the effort to transition away from this outdated practice," Culliney said in the prepared statement. "Perpetuating clearcutting is bad for American taxpayers who lose millions of dollars subsidizing the industry. This bill is a loser for ecology, economy and public process."

She continued that congressional action to pass the proposed language would apply a "heavy legislative hand to what should remain an agency process best left to the U.S. Forest Service."

Murkowski's recommended Interior appropriations bill comes as the current continuing resolution that funds the U.S. government is set to expire early next month.

"The current government funding runs out beginning Dec. 8," Karina Petersen, Murkowski's communications director, said Tuesday afternoon.

It's not clear at this point whether Congress will pursue another continuing resolution or be ready for a full appropriations omnibus bill by Dec. 8, according to Petersen, who said "we won't know entirely what will happen and when it will happen until leadership makes those determinations."

The draft Interior appropriations bill represents Murkowski's positions and will be what's used as the starting point for negotiations between the Senate and House regarding the Interior budget and programs.

Petersen said that, during the past couple of years, Murkowski's Interior appropriations bills have been "very similar if not the same" as what appears in the final omnibus legislation.

"So I can't ... answer hypotheticals, but I have historically seen in the last couple years that what you see in (Murkowski's) Interior bill as far as the programs and the funding levels has been very matched up with what ends up making it in the omnibus," Petersen said.

sbowlen@ketchikandailynews.com