



## FORESTS

### Murkowski targets roadless rule in spending talks

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Published: Wednesday, December 6, 2017



Aerial view of the Tongass National Forest in Alaska. Alan Wu/Flickr

*Correction appended.*

A fight over road construction in the Tongass National Forest may flare up in spending negotiations.

Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska) sponsored a provision in draft Senate appropriations [legislation](#) for Interior and related agencies that would exempt Alaska from federal rules that restrict building of roads in national forests.

Murkowski's move against the "roadless rule" marks another line in a battle that's been playing out, mainly in federal courts, since the Clinton administration handed down the regulations in 2001.

A U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia judge in September dismissed a lawsuit by Alaska seeking to overturn the rule.

Murkowski, chairwoman of the Interior and Environment Appropriations Subcommittee, is also pushing a provision that would slow the Forest Service's transition from old-growth logging to young-growth logging in Tongass and Chugach national forests.

Proponents of lifting the roadless rule in Alaska say the restriction stymies the economy in the southeast part of the state, dependent upon forest resources.

Logging interests have pushed for the change, saying the rule effectively blocks logging in certain areas because there's no economical way to use helicopters, for instance, to remove saw logs from roadless forests.

Environmental groups that have fought to keep the rule in place say lifting it in the Tongass could pave the way for similar moves in other states.

"Our concern is this is a slippery slope for more attacks on the roadless rule," said Megan Birzell, Northwest forests campaign manager for the Wilderness Society in Seattle.

She called Murkowski's measure "really the first concerted attack" on the roadless rule in Congress, after years of court battles.

Murkowski's provision applies only to Alaska, but the Tongass, which totals 17 million acres, accounts for 9.5 million acres of the 58.5 million acres the roadless rule covers in 39 states, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council. The NRDC has said the roadless rule is the best way to create a barrier that protects wildlife in pristine parts of Alaska.

A Senate Republican aide working on the issue said easing the roadless rule is "key to any economy in southeast [Alaska]."

To some environmentalists, the lack of major logging in the area is a reason to keep the roadless rule in effect.

"It's hard to see what the big deal is," said Niel Lawrence, Alaska project director for the NRDC. In southeast Alaska, he said, the roadless rule is protecting forests that support bigger parts of the local economy, such as fishing and tourism.

While the roadless rule has bounced from one court challenge to another, old-growth logging hasn't disappeared from the Tongass.

Some old-growth harvesting was grandfathered in when the rule was enacted. More occurred briefly from 2003 to 2005, after the George W. Bush administration suspended it and before the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals postponed roadless-area logging while a broader forest plan for the Tongass went through litigation of its own.

Murkowski is also seeking through the spending bill to slow the transition from old-growth to young-growth logging in the Tongass, and the measure includes \$1 million for an ongoing inventory of young growth, including stand-level field work and financial analysis.

The Obama administration set a goal of 16 years for the transition, which Murkowski and the Alaska logging industry say is too fast.

"The Committee remains concerned that the transition plan cannot be implemented in a manner that preserves a viable timber industry and reminds the Service that this requires a reliable economic supply of both old and young growth timber from the national forest system," the [report](#) accompanying the appropriations draft bill says.

Murkowski's persistence on that issue follows her own mixed success at pushing for a young-growth inventory through prior spending bills. She's secured money in the past for the Forest Service to conduct young-growth inventory before forging ahead with a transition — only to see the agency decide on a faster transition before doing the inventory.

Lawrence, at the NRDC, said he can understand Murkowski's frustration at the Forest Service, even though he believes the transition to young-growth harvesting can be done relatively quickly.

Environmental groups have said the transition can be done faster than 16 years, the time frame envisioned by the Obama administration, which logging interests objected to.

One group, the Oregon-based Geos Institute, has said its own forest inventories suggest the Forest Service could switch to young-growth logging by 2020 but that the agency hasn't given its recommendations much attention ([Greenwire](#), June 13).

Although Murkowski picked the appropriations bill, other measures could provide a legislative vehicle as well, the Senate aide said.

Final spending levels for fiscal 2018, which began Oct. 1, will likely be set in an omnibus spending bill at some point in the coming weeks.

Lawmakers may also consider supplemental funding to help areas affected by hurricanes and wildfires. Separate legislation on wildfire and forest management could also provide an opportunity.

**Correction:** *The Tongass has 9.5 million acres of roadless area. An earlier version of this story contained an incorrect amount.*

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