



My Turn: Tongass programs growing in right direction

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The Alaska Travel Industry Association has consistently advocated Congress to address the critical decline in federal funding for the Tongass National Forest recreation program. ATIA, along with many tourism operators in Southeast Alaska, has urged Alaska's congressional leaders and the Forest Service to take action and increase investments to levels that allow the Forest Service to successfully carry out planning, management and monitoring responsibilities important to the region's tourism industry.

On behalf of our members from across the state, and particularly those members living and working in Southeast Alaska who rely on the resources afforded by being surrounded by the Tongass National Forest, ATIA thanks Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, for listening and being a champion for our state's tourism industry.

Over the last six years, national funding set by Congress for the Forest Service to manage recreation in the country's 155 national forests has dropped by 15 percent. The decline has been even steeper for the Tongass National Forest, which has suffered nearly three times the level of reductions over the same period. However, as a result of Murkowski's leadership, the Senate Appropriations Committee approved legislation setting funding levels which directed the Forest Service to "prioritize funding for recreation, trails and facilities in the Tongass" in order to bring investment in Alaska's national forests in line with funding levels nationwide.

Tourism is a leading private-sector employer in Southeast Alaska. According to a state report on the economic impact of tourism, of the estimated 38,700 visitor industry-related jobs in Alaska, 28 percent is in the Southeast region. Additionally, more than a million out-of-state visitors travel to Southeast Alaska each year, supporting growth in local economies and generating more than \$591 million in visitor spending in that region.

Nearly 80 percent of the land in Southeast Alaska is within the Tongass National Forest, and people come from all over the world to experience its incredible scenery and abundant fish and wildlife. Without access to Forest Service lands, staff to oversee and administer permits and funding to maintain and improve visitor facilities, the foundation for the travel industry in Southeast Alaska will erode and become a barrier to industry growth.

ATIA appreciates Murkowski's commitment to invest in Forest Service programs which support jobs and economic benefits for Alaskans. On the Tongass, this means growing recreation programs and services and improving the infrastructure that benefits residents, supports tourism businesses and the growing number of visitors Southeast Alaska welcomes every year.

- Sarah Leonard is president and CEO of the Alaska Travel Industry Association.