



Heather Hardcastle shows one of her pressure-bled gillnet salmon.

The salmon we caught last summer are from the forest

The year 2013 is turning out to be a banner year for salmon in Southeast Alaska.

This year's staggering salmon returns are a reminder that the Tongass is the country's preeminent salmon forest. As Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell toured Southeast Alaska recently, I urged him to do all he could to ensure the nation's largest national forest is managed with wild salmon as the highest priority.

More than a whopping 101 million salmon weighing almost 362 million pounds have been landed in Southeast this year. The vast majority of this year's enormous salmon haul is wild pinks — close to 99 percent of which were born and reared in Tongass watersheds. Southeast fishermen surpassed the record 77 million pinks that were caught in 1999. Returns of wild sockeye and coho also have been extremely strong. In almost 35 years of fishing, our family has never caught as many wild sockeye as we did this year.

Payday: Prices for Alaska salmon remain quite good, as well. Although we won't have the average 2013 ex-vessel value numbers for a while, it's safe to say Southeast is on target to have its most lucrative commercial salmon season yet. In the last two

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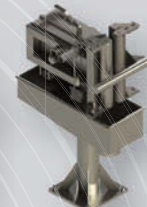
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years, Southeast was the most valuable commercial salmon fishing region in the state, with the total ex-vessel value exceeding \$200 million in 2011.

I point out these numbers because they underscore how Tongass salmon drive an enormous economic engine and underpin every community in this region. Salmon produced in Tongass streams and lakes sustain hundreds of commercial fishing families like mine. It's estimated that more than one in 10 regional jobs are tied to salmon. These fish are a cultural icon, a focus of recreational and subsistence fishing, a mainstay of our diet, and a keystone species.

The Tongass produces almost one-third of Alaska's overall salmon harvest from less than 5 percent of the land base. There's a reason for this. By and large, this region still has healthy forest watersheds, which salmon rely on to reproduce. Scientists, like former Forest Service fisheries biologist Mason Bryant, confirm what fishermen have long known: "The numerous intact watersheds throughout Southeast Alaska are a critical factor in maintaining sustainable salmon stocks in Southeast Alaska."

The Forest Service and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game deserve credit for the current state of Southeast salmon fisheries and health of the salmon forest. However, I — and at least several hundred local commercial fishermen like me — want the Forest Service to work to ensure that the Tongass continues to produce diverse and abundant salmon runs far into the future.

Forest Service: Many of us are frustrated because the Forest Service and some Alaska leaders are not looking to the future at all, but instead are looking to turn back the clock and ramp up

large-scale logging in this region. As has been reported, the Forest Service just approved the Big Thorne timber sale for central Prince of Wales, which is by far the largest volume timber sale the Tongass has seen since the mid-'90s.

Meanwhile, Sen. Lisa Murkowski and the Parnell administration are pushing a proposal to carve out a 2-million-acre timber trust from the Tongass.

In all of this talk about the potential to resuscitate the timber industry on the Tongass, where is the discussion of how to maintain and build upon the incredible success of the forest's salmon fishing industry?

I call on Mr. Tidwell to direct the Forest Service to invest in the "blue chip" growth industries of the Tongass that employ some 17,000 people and pump at least \$2 billion into the regional economy every year:

Southeast is on target to have its most lucrative commercial salmon season yet.

fishing and tourism. Conserving intact salmon watersheds and working to restore impacted watersheds is a great place to start.

When we met Mr. Tidwell in Washington, D.C., four years ago, my dad explained, "If you look through the lens of wild salmon and ensure their needs are met before proceeding with any action, you can't go wrong."

I ask the Forest Service chief to remember these words as he leads the Forest Service and its management of the Tongass in the years ahead. ↓

Heather Hardcastle, M.E.M., is a co-owner of Taku River Reds and an outreach coordinator for Trout Unlimited.



Taku River Reds is co-owned by Heather Hardcastle and others. Corey Arnold photo



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