

Alaska Dispatch News

Opinions

Senator should rethink rider on Tongass management plan

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In 1964, my father pulled out of Elko, Nevada, with his family loaded up in their Chevy pickup on their way to Alaska. My father had accepted a position with the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Through the years, he traveled to every village in the state, but fell in love with Southeast Alaska and those big Sitka spruce. He had a passion for hunting, and the late George Dalton, a Tlingit of Hoonah, took him under his wing and taught him how to hunt the massive brown bears of Chichagof Island. My mother and father were honored to be adopted into the Eagle and Raven clans of Hoonah. With the blessing of his mentor, my father took a courageous step to quit his full-time government job and its securities to transition to a full-time guide and outfitter on the Tongass National Forest. From those early years of operation to the current day, the changes he has seen have been profound.

Now in our second generation of operation, our love and passion for the Tongass has not slackened, but rather intensified. Growing up in my guiding family with the opportunity of living out "in the Bush" for extended periods of time, I watched the large-scale logging industry come in and ravage this spectacular place in the 1980s and '90s. It feels like déjà vu as now my young family and I are facing the same peril that my father and mother so passionately and bravely fought to combat — unsustainable large-scale logging.

I can remember traveling with my parents to Washington, D.C., in the mid- and late '80s to meet with lawmakers to help them understand what damage was being irreparably done in a rare and magical environment. I remember my parents meeting personally with Sen. Frank Murkowski to petition him to stop destroying our national heritage for the benefit of a small special interest. Now, 30 years later, my husband and I have also gone to Washington, D.C., to meet with Sen. Lisa Murkowski and other lawmakers in an effort to help her see that the old standards of operation on the Tongass (large-scale old growth logging) are simply not sustainable, economical, or in the best interest of the vast majority of users.



Alisha Decker

Like many other businesses on the Tongass, our operation relies on intact, old-growth watersheds. Quite simply, healthy forest lands produce abundant bear, deer and fish, and provide a backdrop for the adventures our clients pay top-dollar to experience. Once logged, the productivity of these lands evaporates. Logging and road building displace wildlife and clear-cuts quickly become sterile biologic wastelands. Many of the places we guide already contain the last bits of remaining productive old-growth forests in a given area and further timber harvest would render them useless to wildlife and thus useless to our business and others like it. These realities seem to be lost on Sen. Murkowski given the recent backroom rider she added to the appropriations bill that would repeal the Tongass Land Management Plan (TLMP) amendment and the conservation measures it contains for wildlife and fish.

[Old friends clash in battle over old-growth logging in Tongass]

Tourism, guiding and fishing are a \$2 billion industry here in Southeast Alaska and provide 21 percent of regional employment. On the other hand, logging operations on the Tongass cost the American taxpayer roughly \$20

million each year and employ about 100 people. Sen. Murkowski's rider flies in the face of these facts as well.

The Tongass management amendment was the result of almost three years of collaboration and compromise on the part of a diverse group of local businesses and organizations. More than 7,000 diverse Alaskans went on record in support of the enhanced conservation measures for wildlife and fish habitat it contained. The Forest Service conducted a robust series of open houses, public meetings and comment periods that resulted in more than 270,000 comments on the plan. The senator's appropriations rider usurps this locally-driven process in favor of one very small, highly subsidized industry that exports much of its product and the jobs that go with them overseas. Is this really part of the blueprint for making America great again?

[Tongass plan isn't perfect, but Murkowski should let it work]

With continuing budget resolutions on the horizon, Sen. Murkowski still has time to pull her rider and throw her support back to the real economic drivers in the region. She can make the choice to respect the local processes and public opinions that created the amended management plan and follow the will of the people who elected her, or she can continue to pander to special interests and turn a deaf ear to the biological and economic realities that are now in play on the Tongass.

I do not consider myself an environmentalist. However, I am proud to say that I am a staunch conservationist. Without intact old-growth watersheds, our fish and game for all Alaskans is in profound peril. These lessons of loss have been taught harshly in close neighboring areas, and we simply do not need to repeat this in the Tongass. It is not too late to set aside what remains for the use and enjoyment of generations to come. President Trump has made it clear that the process to "Make America Great Again" must put the power to govern into the hands of the people that live and work where decisions are being made. The Tongass Land Management Plan amendment is a perfect example of exactly that.

Please reach out to Sen. Murkowski and let her know that you do not want to dismantle the amended Tongass management plan.

Alisha "Mutts" Decker is a Tongass guide outfitter with her family business, Glacier Guides, Inc., based in Hoonah.

Comments