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FOR THE JUNEAU EMPIRE

Logging doesn't need to expand

Late last year, the U.S. Forest Service finalized the latest amendment to the Tongass Land and Resource Management Plan (TLMP.) One of the focuses of that amendment is to conserve critical salmon spawning and rearing habitat in the Tongass National Forest by eliminating the extraction of old growth forest in select watersheds. To accommodate the logging industry, the USFS is surveying second growth forest that are now coming of harvestable age.

Currently a big portion of our economy is driven by commercial fishing and tourism, of which salmon is a key factor. Commercial fishing provides over 4,000 jobs and generates some \$260 million to the local economy. In addition to Southeast's commercial fleet, charter/guided fishing heavily relies on the wild salmon runs from the Tongass. Sportfish

tourism has become an essential part of the economy to much of the region. Recognizing these values, the USFS put strong conservation measures for salmon in the amended TLMP.

At this time, U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, has introduced a rider to the Interior Appropriations bill that would repeal both the latest amendments to the TLMP and the Tongass Roadless Rule. This rider will also prohibit the transition from old growth to

second growth in the Tongass even though there is second growth that harvestable now. It seems to me that Murkowski wants to see a return of big logging, which will have negative impacts on both fisheries and tourism in Southeast.

The latest TMLP amendment and its conservation measures for salmon habitat isn't something that the USFS came up with overnight. They were the result of a public process that took over three years of studies, collaboration and planning. The USFS worked with logging, fishing, tourism, Alaska Native organizations and the public to come up with a long-term plan that would be beneficial to everyone. Over 270,000 comments were turned in during the comment period in support of these measures and the transition out of old growth harvest. But apparently this isn't good enough for Murkowski. Why? It seems like a win/win for Alaska and Alaskans.

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I'm not against having a viable logging industry in Southeast. In fact, I think there is ample room for one. But it is time to get the focus off old growth and transition harvest efforts to second growth. The infrastructure/roads are already in place for that. Bringing some existing logging roads back to usable condition is doable under the Tongass Roadless Rule and would cost far less than building new roads. This would save millions of taxpayer dollars in subsidies for building new roads and would avoid damaging intact salmon

habitat. Overall, Alaska loses if the TLMP Amendment and Tongass Roadless Rule are rolled back. Murkowski should respect the public process that created both as well as the new future for the Tongass that the people envision.

Michael Cole is a lifelong Alaskan, active outdoors enthusiast and advocate of public lands. He is currently the Website Manager of Alaska Fly Fishing Goods.

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