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By Rich Moniak (/rich-moniak-0)

For the Juneau Empire



Tongass timber and the roadless rule

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The Stikine River flows through the Tongass National Forest on its way to the sea. (Michael Penn | Juneau Empire File)

During his State of the State address last week, Gov. Bill Walker said “Alaskans are the ones best positioned to determine responsible development” of natural resources in Alaska. He’s not the first, and won’t be the last, to make that argument. But he’s wrong to apply it to the impact of the Roadless Rule on the Tongass National Forest. Because its trees and minerals don’t belong to us.

▶ Walker’s comments follow a long litany of high pitched, misleading rhetoric preached by the state’s elected officials about management of the Tongass. The Roadless Rule in 2001 gave it a new twist. Almost immediately after its implementation, the state sued the federal government.

Under the terms of a settlement reached in 2003, a “temporary” exemption was applied to the Tongass. Despite the short-term implication



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of that word, it remained

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Within a few months of that ruling, U.S. Sen. Mark Begich and Rep. Don Young introduced legislation to repeal the Roadless Rule's applicability to Alaska's National Forests. They characterized it as a "one size fits all" approach to management that didn't consider the unique conditions in our state.

According to the Alaska Journal of Commerce, Begich argued the Forest Service should be allowed to follow its 2008 Tongass Land Management Plan. But not because it was developed by local managers with the input of Southeast Alaskans. The current plan, approved in 2106, had the same level of local involvement. But the delegation wants it scrapped because, unlike the 2008 plan, it doesn't recognize the exemption.

The "one size fits all" complaint is also nonsense. As explained in last September's ruling by another federal court upholding the Roadless Rule, the Forest Service "treated the Tongass Forest differently from any other national forest" by considering four alternatives.

In a statement following that decision, U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski claimed one of the rule's main purposes is to block road construction on energy and mining projects. That's a stretch given the few such projects under consideration.

One of those is the Niblack mine on Prince of Wales Island. According to its owners, the site has an existing 1.5 mile access road. Because it's not a roadless area, it seems the rule shouldn't apply. But even if it does, seeking an exception for it would be better than applying a "one size fits all" exemption to the rest of the Tongass.

Besides, the main thrust of Murkowski's complaint was about access for logging. "The rule has decimated our timber industry," she argued, even though it had no impact for the eight years the Tongass was exempt. More significantly, that statement is hyperbolic throwback to the 1990s when Southeast Alaska's two pulp mills went to their grave.

After years of profiting from government subsidies, it was the declining pulp market that drove both out of business. As I wrote in July 2016, the judge who presided over the Alaska Pulp Company's lawsuit against the Forest Service found the evidence proving that in the company's own records of internal meetings.

Not so ironically, Murkowski's father was a U.S. Senator when that suit was filed. Not only did he back that deviant effort by APC to swipe more than a billion dollars from the federal treasury, but later as Alaska's governor he filed the lawsuit over the Roadless Rule.

That isn't just a classic case of a politician contradicting his belief in free market principals by throwing his weight behind a rule that would harm the industry he claims to support. It's also a case of how the insincere rhetoric of a politician can be used to protect an industry's corrupting on



I don't know if Walker is aware of all those details. And that story may not seem relevant now. But the part that hasn't changed in 25 years is the economics of building roads to access timber. It's still not profitable.

And there's the older history that matters. The Tongass National Forest was created by presidential proclamation in 1902. Under the Statehood Act, Alaska agreed to "forever disclaim all right and title to" it and all other federally owned lands. That's why we don't have exclusive rights to determine how the Tongass is managed even if we're the most knowledgeable about its resources.

• Rich Moniak is a Juneau resident and retired civil engineer with more than 25 years of experience working in the public sector. He contributes a regular "My Turn" to the Juneau Empire. My Turns and Letters to the Editor represent the view of the author, not the view of the Juneau Empire.

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