



My Turn: Ax the timber budget

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Recent news articles and letters reflect a lot of worry about government costs and budgets — there are too many large capital projects, rate increases and cuts to public services. What to do? The largest sources of government waste in Southeast Alaska are the seemingly untouchable state and federal timber sale programs. There were a few fiscally responsible Republicans up north who unsuccessfully proposed to ax the Southeast timber program from the state budget. Unfortunately, most Alaskans with a seat at the table in the federal and state spending processes will selectively slash funds for schools and other social services with no consideration for axing the timber budget.

Sorry kids. The regional priority is the Southeast Alaska timber economy: a mix of colonialism, socialism and corporate welfare. Indicators of a free-market based system such as competition, private investment and risk are hard to find. The government provides a cradle to grave subsidy mostly to two corporations, enabling them to continue to scar Southeast Alaska's island ecosystems with massive clearcuts that remove important fish and wildlife habitat. They then ship out a large number of raw logs elsewhere to generate processing value.

This misguided priority punishes private sector economic activity in the region by reducing fishery and recreation outputs from public forests. Worse, taxpayers pay for the logging roads and timber bureaucracies, including a massive federal bureaucracy that supports more government employees than workers in the woods. Taxpayers fund the seemingly endless establishment of expensive advisory bodies selected to rubber stamp government timber expenditures. There's more. The federal contractors who help to implement the program cost as much or more money than the sales bring in. As a final insult, taxpayers have to pay for expensive efforts to clean up the mess, to the limited extent that is even possible.

And, despite the budget crisis, the state actually plans to expand its timber sale program and develop a massive logging road system throughout the region. The state's Southeast timber program expenditures already significantly exceed its receipts. This is what economists call a "net loss."

On the federal side, immoderate Democrats and unconservative Republicans allocate tens of millions annually through the appropriations process to support the two timber corporations and return, at best, a few million in receipts — a federal scale net loss. The largest and most destructive federal timber sales are now known as "stewardship projects." This is what modern dictionaries call "greenwashing."

The Obama administration wants to throw even more money away as it plans a Great Leap Forward (the “Tongass Transition”). The feds will ramp up old-growth logging substantially over the next few decades with no plans to end it in the foreseeable future. At the same time, they will spend more public money on infrastructure, equipment and preparing timber sales that target recovering, second-growth forests that are too immature to make sense from an economic perspective.

Hopey changey stuff indeed. Southeast Alaskans need to challenge their various federal, state and local representatives who think it’s important to maintain the timber industry through public funding. It is obvious some selective cutting is necessary, and it would be better to fire up a chainsaw and clearcut the timber program budgets and reallocate that money to the needs of schools and ferries and other essential government services.

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