

# Businesses pen Tongass letter to Congress

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A contingent of Southeast business owners in the tourism industry want Congress to spend more on Tongass National Forest recreation programs, they wrote in an open letter.

A group of 49 business “owners, operators and supporters of Southeast Alaska’s tourism and recreation industry,” most of whom are based in Southeast, sent a letter in May asking Congress to prioritize funding the Forest Service’s recreation programs and trails. Fifteen of the businesses are Juneau-based, including Princess Cruises, Southeast Alaska Independent Living, Allen Marine Tours and Alaska Seaplanes.

“As you consider and decide on how to appropriate taxpayer dollars, we ask you to make a smart and prudent investment for this important program in the Tongass (National Forest),” the letter states.

In his budget released in February, President Barack Obama allotted about \$6.5 billion for the Forest Service for the coming fiscal year. Committees in the U.S. House and Senate are expected to take action this week on legislation to set fiscal year 2016 funding levels for Forest Service trails, facilities and recreation programs, Juneau Economic Development Council Director Brian Holst wrote in an email last week.

The Tongass National Forest had a budget of about \$47 million for the current fiscal year. About \$3.4 million of that was allocated for recreation programs, while \$11 million was allocated for the timber program, according to National Forest Service numbers. The recreation amount might not include all recreation funds, a budget officer said Thursday. All budget numbers are subject to change once everything is accounted for at the end of the fiscal year.

The letter to Congress cites a decline in “federal investment in the Tongass recreation program” of 42 percent over the past six years. It says funding for Tongass recreation and trails makes up

less than 10 percent of the national forest's budget, but that the visitor industry accounts for about 50 percent of the forest's revenue.

"This return on investment could be maximized rather than undermined by enhanced ... support for the Tongass recreation program," the letter reads.

A November report by Montana-based research firm Headwater Economics also posited the Forest Service was underspending on recreation in the Tongass.

According to the Forest Service's budgets over the past five years, the report says, an average of 37 percent of Tongass funds have gone to its timber program, while only 15 percent has gone to recreation programs.

The study argues that spending should be reprioritized because the visitor industry in Southeast is growing while the logging industry is shrinking.

The Headwaters Economics report was commissioned by the Seattle-based Wilburforce and Campion foundations, which fund projects to protect the environment.

The letter sent to Congress was brought about by the visitor industry working group facilitated by JEDC.

Holst said Wednesday the letter shows that much of the Southeast tourism industry is aligned on the cause.

"We're not going to be able to grow tourism in Alaska without improving our access to recreational opportunities ... on the Tongass," he said.

Working group leader Kirby Day, director of shore operations for Princess Cruises and a Juneau resident, said the group has had a good relationship with the Forest Service, and "thought it was prudent to remind Congress that not only do Alaskans recreate in the Tongass, but visitors recreate and tour the Tongass, as well."

"If the infrastructure isn't maintained, sooner or later the Forest Service liability-wise can't continue to let people use" trails, cabins and other facilities in the Tongass, he said.

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