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Monday, March 11, 2013

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Fishermen and Tour Operators Press Congress to Protect Tongass Salmon and Trout Watersheds

The Tongass 77 Proposal Would Help Guarantee a Self-Sustaining, Economic Engine

(Juneau, Alaska) – A delegation of commercial and sport fishermen and tour operators traveled to the nation’s capital this week to press Congress to enact stronger protections for salmon and trout in the country’s largest national forest. The Tongass National Forest, a 17-million-acre temperate rainforest in Southeast Alaska, is home to one of the world’s largest and healthiest wild salmon fisheries. Despite its bounty as America’s salmon forest, some 65-percent of salmon and trout habitat in the Tongass is not protected at the watershed scale.

The delegation is asking Congress to support a legislative proposal called the Tongass 77. If enacted into law, the Tongass 77 would permanently conserve at the watershed scale some 1.9 million acres of high-value salmon and trout habitat on the Tongass National Forest and make fish and wildlife the highest management priority in these watersheds. These 77 watersheds are currently open to development activities such as logging, road building, and privatization that can harm fish.

“I’m in Washington, D.C., this week asking Congress to step up to the plate and support the Tongass 77. This would be the first significant piece of pro-salmon legislation passed in the Tongass in more than 20 years. It’s time for people to realize the Tongass is a huge salmon producer and yet much of the best

land is not managed for fish first,” said David Clark, a Juneau seiner and owner of the commercial fishing web site, www.juneautek.com.

Clark noted Southeast Alaska led all other regions of Alaska last year in terms of salmon harvests, with commercial fishermen landing nearly 37 million salmon. For the second year in a row, Southeast Alaska was the most lucrative place in the state for salmon fishing as the dockside value of the commercial harvest totaled \$153.2 million.

Salmon and trout contribute an estimated \$1 billion to the regional economy and support one in 10 jobs in Southeast Alaska, according to the U.S. Forest Service. The Tongass National Forest produces on average 28-percent of Alaska’s annual commercial salmon catch from less than five-percent of the state’s land base. Some 70-percent of wild salmon harvested from national forests originate in the Tongass. And sport fishermen catch close to 1 million salmon every year in the Tongass, the majority of them wild Coho, one of the premier species.

“It’s estimated that almost 7,300 people in Southeast are employed because of salmon and trout. I’m one of them. As a fly fishing guide, I make my living taking anglers to some of the best salmon fishing spots left in the world. I support the Tongass 77 because it makes economic and biological sense. Why not take pro-active steps to make sure what we have here isn’t squandered as it has been in so many other parts of the Lower 48 and beyond?” said Matt Boline, a Juneau-based guide with Bear Creek Outfitters.

The Tongass 77 proposal grew from extensive research and collaboration among scientists, fishermen, conservationists, and land management agencies. Trout Unlimited ultimately developed the proposal from state-of-the-art GIS and conservation planning tools employed by the Alaska offices of Audubon Alaska and The Nature Conservancy. Scientists and GIS experts used peer-reviewed science to identify the watersheds they consider the “best of the best” for salmon and trout habitat from hundreds of watersheds not currently protected from development. The 77 high-value watersheds they identified, comprising some 1.9 million acres, are currently open to activities that can harm fish. Based on their outstanding fish habitat, the highest and best use of these 77 watersheds should be for the production of salmon and trout.

Congress could achieve this by passing legislation that would permanently place these watersheds into a land status known in the Tongass as LUD II, or Land Use Designation II. Congress has previously applied this designation to twelve areas of the Tongass through the 1990 Tongass Timber Reform Act -- areas that were chosen for special management because of their critical importance for fish and wildlife habitat and their high value for tourism and recreation.

“The visitor industry contributes enormously to the Southeast Alaska economy and studies have shown most visitors want to experience the forest in its natural state. I know our clients do. The Tongass 77 proposal would ensure that almost two million acres of the forest will be largely left intact for fish and wildlife. I support this proposal from the standpoint of someone whose livelihood depends on these lands and who also enjoys the wild character of the Tongass,” said Laurie Cooper, a Juneau wilderness guide.

The delegation, whose trip is sponsored by Trout Unlimited, is meeting with several Congressional offices and Administration officials during the course of the week.

Watch a video and learn more about the Tongass 77 at www.americansalmonforest.org.