

Thank you, Tongass National Forest, for banner Southeast Alaska salmon season

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OPINION: Southeast Alaska is having a banner salmon season. The fish drive an enormous economic engine on the Tongass National Forest, and they should be a larger part of new discussions about reviving the timber industry. Xa'at via Flickr

Commercial salmon fishermen in Alaska are smashing records this summer. As of early September, some 266 million salmon have been sustainably landed in Alaska. The previous historic high for the number of salmon caught was in 2005 when fishermen harvested just shy of 222 million.

As the co-owner of a family-run seafood business based in Juneau, I keep a particularly close eye on the Southeast Alaska harvest. Here, too, it's been a gangbuster year with a whopping 100 million salmon weighing 366.5 million pounds harvested to date.

The vast majority of this year's enormous Southeast salmon haul is wild pinks -- close to 99 percent of which were born and reared in watersheds of the Tongass National Forest, a 17-million-acre temperate rainforest. Southeast fishermen have already surpassed the record 77 million pinks that were caught in 1999. Returns of wild sockeye and coho have also been extremely strong. In almost 35 years of fishing, our family has never caught as many wild sockeye as we did this year.

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Prices for Alaska salmon remain quite good, as well. Although we won't have the average 2013 ex-vessel value numbers for a while, it's safe to say Southeast is on target to have its most lucrative commercial salmon season yet. In the last two years, Southeast was the most valuable commercial salmon fishing region in the state, with the total ex-vessel value exceeding \$200 million in 2011.

I point out these numbers because they underscore how salmon drive an enormous economic engine on the Tongass National Forest and underpin every community in this region. Salmon produced in Tongass streams and lakes sustain hundreds of commercial fishing families like mine. It's estimated more than one in 10 regional jobs are tied to salmon. These fish are a cultural icon, a focus of recreational and subsistence fishing, a mainstay of our diet, and a keystone species.

The Tongass produces almost one-third of Alaska's overall salmon harvest from less than 5 percent of the land base. There's a reason for this. By and large, this region still has healthy forest watersheds on which salmon rely to reproduce. Scientists, like former Forest Service fisheries biologist Mason Bryant, confirm what fishermen have long known: "The numerous intact watersheds throughout Southeast Alaska are a critical factor in maintaining sustainable salmon stocks in Southeast Alaska."

The Forest Service and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game deserve credit for the current state of Southeast salmon fisheries and health of the salmon forest. However, I -- and at least several hundred local commercial fishermen like me -- want the Forest Service to work to ensure the Tongass continues to produce diverse and abundant salmon runs far into the future.

Many of us are frustrated because the Forest Service and some Alaska leaders are not looking to the future at all, but instead looking to turn back the clock and ramp up large-scale logging in this region. As has been reported, the Forest Service just approved the Big Thorne timber sale for central Prince of Wales, which is by far the largest-volume timber sale the Tongass has seen since the mid-90s. Meanwhile, Senator Murkowski and the Parnell administration are pushing a proposal to carve out a 2 million-acre timber trust from the Tongass.

In all of this talk about the potential to resuscitate the timber industry on the Tongass, where is the discussion of how to maintain and build upon the incredible success of the forest's salmon fishing industry?

I call on the Forest Service leadership to invest in the “blue-chip” growth industries of the Tongass that employ some 17,000 people and pump at least \$2 billion into the regional economy every year: fishing and tourism. Conserving intact salmon watersheds and working to restore impacted watersheds is a great place to start.

When we met Tom Tidwell, the Forest Service chief, in Washington, D.C., four years ago, my dad offered him some sage advice:

“If you look through the lens of wild salmon, and ensure their needs are met before proceeding with any action, you can't go wrong.”

I ask the Forest Service chief to remember these words as he leads the Forest Service and its management of the Tongass in the years ahead.

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