



Senator Lisa Murkowski, Governor Sean Parnell, Try to Turn Back the Clock in Alaska's Tongass National Forest

Fishing and Tourism Jobs Threatened by Call for Increased Logging of Temperate Rainforest

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

JUNEAU, AK – Trout Unlimited and Sitka Conservation Society voiced concern today that Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-AK, may be backing an ill-conceived proposal by Alaska Governor Sean Parnell that the Forest Service hand over 2-million acres of Tongass National Forest old growth to the state for clear-cut logging. TU and SCS also expressed deep concern about Senator Murkowski's recent call on the U.S. Forest Service to boost old-growth logging in Southeast Alaska's Tongass National Forest, describing the senator's remarks as inaccurate and out of touch with current economic conditions in the 17-million-acre temperate rainforest.

“We're worried that Sen. Murkowski is sprinting in the wrong direction when it comes to how the Tongass National Forest should be managed,” said Tim Bristol, director of Trout Unlimited's Alaska Program. “It's clear that the majority of Southeast Alaskans and Americans in general are not interested in returning to a heavily subsidized program of damaging clear-cut logging and road building. The Parnell Administration's demand that American people hand over millions of acres of their wildest national forest to logging interests is absurd. These proposals put ideology ahead of what is best for the economy and environment of the region.”

On Tuesday, Murkowski addressed the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee during an oversight hearing on forest management. In her opening remarks, Murkowski blamed the decline of the Southeast Alaska timber industry on federal policies, environmental lawsuits and stringent regulations, ignoring the fact that for decades the Tongass timber program operated at unsustainable levels and was only able to maintain itself with massive government subsidies. She implied that if only the Forest Service increased the amount of clear-cut logging allowed on the Tongass, the timber industry could return to its former past when two large pulp mills consumed vast volumes of the Tongass' rare old-growth trees.

“This is disturbing rhetoric. It’s hard to believe the senator is this out of touch with what is going on in Southeast,” said Bristol.

Murkowski brought with her Alaska State Forester Chris Maisch who also implored the committee to get out the cut and recommended the transfer of two million acres of federal land to the State of Alaska where it would be managed with logging as the top priority over all other uses.

“The last thing Southeast Alaska needs is a return to a massive old-growth logging program in the Tongass National Forest. Our region’s economy is sustained by a healthy forest that produces tens of millions of wild salmon every year, employing more than 7,200 people in a billion-dollar salmon fishing industry. Our economy is also fueled by tourism, an industry with more than 10,000 jobs that depends on beautiful scenery in its natural state, not unsightly clear cuts,” said Andrew Thoms, executive director of the Sitka Conservation Society.

Tuesday’s remarks by Murkowski and Maisch came on the heels of a recent Senate Energy and Natural Resources vote in favor of legislation granting about 70,000 acres of the Tongass National Forest to Sealaska Corp., a privately-owned Alaska Native corporation with an active clear-cut logging program in Southeast Alaska.

“The Tongass National Forest is facing very real and tangible threats from those that wish to liquidate its rare and extremely valuable old-growth timber. It’s time for Congress and the Obama Administration to step up to the plate and ensure that we don’t reverse the progress made over the past few years in the Tongass. This is a national treasure that belongs to all Americans. It shouldn’t be squandered and the Forest Service should do what it said it would do,” said Bristol.

Bristol was referring to the Forest Service’s May 2010 pledge to transition away from large-scale old-growth logging in the Tongass National Forest and move toward managing young-growth timber and supporting job creation in existing industries such as fishing, seafood processing, mariculture, tourism, visitor services and alternative energy. Despite the promising statement from three years ago, the Forest Service has yet to make

good on its transition pledge. Funding for visitor services, recreation and forest restoration is inadequate and the agency continues to focus its budget and staff resources on old-growth timber planning. It has 130 million board feet of Tongass old-growth under contract to cut and is planning to sell another 600 million board feet over the next five years. In his testimony on Tuesday, Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell noted that a 100 million board foot timber sale, dubbed Big Thorne, is expected to be released soon. It would be the largest-volume old-growth timber sale in the Tongass since the pulp mill days, said Bristol.

“It’s a step backwards,” said Thoms.

Bristol and Thoms also pointed out inaccuracies in Murkowski and Maisch’s grim portrayal of Southeast Alaska’s economy. Contrary to their notion that the region’s population and jobs are shrinking, Southeast Alaska’s population has been growing since its low point in 2007, according to the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development.

“The population of Southeast Alaska children, after a long steep decline, is finally on the rise. The region’s newborns to four year olds have increased by nearly 15 percent between 2007 and 2011 (led by apparent baby booms in Skagway, Prince of Wales, Haines, and Wrangell),” according to an October 2012 report by the Southeast Conference, a regional trade group that monitors economic trends.

In 2012, the region’s total student count increased slightly for the first time since 1996, the report says.

Also noteworthy is that Southeast Alaska has the largest seafood industry workforce in the state and in 2011 and 2012, Southeast was the most lucrative region in Alaska for commercial salmon fishing, according to state government data.

“Regional bright spots include increased mining, higher fish prices and increased commercial fishing efforts, visitors and cruise ships numbers rising to previous high levels, increasing health care jobs, and relatively steady government employment. Also interesting are increased marine services activity, such as ship-building and vessel haul-out capacity, and regional investment and activity in mariculture,” the Southeast Conference notes.

“Rather than misleading people into thinking that the main barrier to job creation in Southeast Alaska is a lack of logging, Sen. Murkowski and Governor Parnell should be championing the real drivers of the region’s economy – fishing and tourism, and the Tongass National Forest that sustains them,” Bristol said.