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Why I support the Tongass 77

By Matt Boline | For the Capital City Weekly

I am a fly fishing guide. I like telling people that. I feel like it gives a person a big slice of who I am without having to say much. As a fly fishing guide and avid outdoorsman, I take pride in being in tune with the specific environments that I use to earn a paycheck or to fill up my freezer for the winter. This is why, when asked by Trout Unlimited, I was more than willing to head to Washington, D.C. in March to lobby for increased protection on trout/salmon spawning and rearing grounds in the Tongass National Forest.

I traveled to D.C. with a delegation of fishermen and tourism operators who support the Tongass 77 proposal and want to see it become law. The Tongass 77 would ensure that the 77 top watersheds for salmon and trout that remain open to development get the protection and management focus they deserve. If enacted, this proposal would permanently protect 1.9 million acres of high-value fish habitat, spanning 77 watersheds, in the Tongass. I support the Tongass 77 proposal from Trout Unlimited because it is good for the fish, for the Tongass Forest, and it is good for the people of Southeast Alaska. The more I became involved with the proposal the more I learned just how multifaceted it is. It is more than a proposal to protect the forest and the fish. It is a proposal to support the more than 17,000 Southeast jobs related to healthy fisheries. It is a proposal to support the nearly \$2 billion industry that ecotourism and fishing represents. But, most importantly, the Tongass 77 is a proposal that supports and nurtures the transformation that began a long time ago to a local economy based on tourism and fishing.

The week seven others and I spent in D.C. bumping elbows with our lawmakers was great. It gave me a deeper understanding and respect for the lawmaking process - and it is a process. It also gave me a deeper respect for just how amazing the Tongass Forest is. I spoke with Congressional offices from northern California about the gradual decline of salmon numbers the further you move down the coast from Alaska and the good old days when San Francisco Bay was absolutely loaded with Kings. It made me wish I could go back in time to experience it first hand. There are a thousand stories like that on thousands of streams as you move up and down the coast of the Pacific Northwest. The closer you get to Alaska the fewer in number these stories become.

The Tongass 77 seeks to protect the 77 best of the best watersheds in the Tongass Forest. These watersheds are spread from Prince of Wales Island to Yakutat. These watersheds are important due to the massive amount of fish they produce. , They are important for subsistence fisheries and have high value to ecotourism and sport and commercial fishing. I've been asked why these watersheds and not others? All summer long I hear this same question from my clients. I tell them just wait and you'll see...then they hook into their first fish on one of the Tongass 77 streams and they get it. Huge smiles and thousands of pictures later they all get it. If you have not had the chance to fish directly in one of the Tongass 77 watersheds no doubt you have caught fish in the ocean on their way into one of 77 watersheds.

We have a mostly intact ecosystem in the Tongass Forest. Let's not let the mistakes made down south repeat themselves here. Whether you're a fisherman, a hunter, skier, a day hiker, or someone who just enjoys sunny Southeast days staring out the window. You are directly impacted by the bounty of the Tongass Forest and intact watersheds are the biggest part of that. Learn more about the Tongass 77 at www.americansalmonforest.org