

April 19, 2021

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

As you recommence your work at the Department of Agriculture, you have a unique opportunity to review programs and policies as part of this new administration to assure they are aligned with the public interest and are the highest and best use of taxpayer resources. As you conduct this review, you should take the fiscally responsible step of prohibiting federal funds from being used to pay for, subsidize, design, study, or construct roads for logging in the Tongass National Forest.

This action is widely supported by congressional and conservation leaders. Last July, the House of Representatives voted to approve the following language in the base text of the Fiscal Year 2021 Interior, Environment and Related Agencies appropriations bill. This language was also previously included in the Fiscal Year 2020 bill after the House of Representatives voted to approve the Blumenauer-Gallego amendment in a bipartisan vote of 243-188. The language said:

*“None of the funds made available by this Act may be used to plan, design, study, or construct, for the purpose of harvesting timber by private entities or individuals, a forest development road in the Tongass National Forest.”*

For decades, the timber industry in the Tongass National Forest has benefited from hundreds of millions of dollars in taxpayer subsidies. If all roadbuilding, maintenance and timber sale costs in the Tongass are taken into account, subsidies for logging Tongass timber have cost taxpayers approximately \$600 million over the last 20 years, largely due to the cost of designing, building and maintaining new logging roads. The Forest Service loses approximately \$600 for every thousand board feet of timber that is sold from the Tongass, and current plans call for the Forest Service to offer timber sales of nearly 300 million board feet over the next five years. Considering historic averages, these planned sales would cost taxpayers more than \$180 million, with costs from maintenance and upkeep accruing years into the future.

In October of last year, the Trump administration finalized a complete exemption for the Tongass from the 2001 Federal Roadless Rule, stripping roadless area protections from more than 9 million acres despite objections from affected Tribes and 96% of all public comment. In December, the Office of Inspector General found the Forest Service unlawfully awarded \$2 million to the State of Alaska to facilitate this rulemaking. As you consider how to best restore taxpayer faith in the management of the Tongass National Forest, this incident – along with future subsidies to the timber industry if formerly protected Roadless areas are clear-cut logged – are among numerous reasons requiring prompt restoration of the full Roadless Rule to the Tongass National Forest.

A recent internal audit by the Forest Service of its Tongass timber sales program found it was insufficiently managed due to numerous irregularities, discrepancies, and conflicts of interest over a

period of years. New roadbuilding in undeveloped roadless areas in Southeast Alaska is a completely unjustifiable waste and an assault on vital forest values. The timber industry makes up just a tiny fraction of the region's economy — less than 1% — and exports much of what it cuts down from the forest for foreign processing because local mills and manufacturers don't want it. The inherently exorbitant costs of building and maintaining logging roads in this remote and challenging region, along with past logging activities that disproportionately targeted the largest and most valuable stands, means that many Forest Service timber sales fail to attract bids despite their significant subsidy. Continuing to allocate limited budgetary resources toward expanding an environmentally harmful road system for a failing and mismanaged timber program serves no appreciable public benefit.

In an effort to responsibly use taxpayer funds and protect forest lands which are critical for conservation, biodiversity, and climate change mitigation, we ask that you halt this unnecessary and damaging spending on road development permanently. Doing so would protect U.S. taxpayers, Southeast Alaska's vibrant outdoor economy, hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation interests, and subsistence users of forest resources – and put the U.S. Forest Service on a more sustainable path for the future.

Thank you for your consideration of our request.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Knight  
President  
Alaska Rainforest Defenders

Leah Donahey  
Legislative Director  
Alaska Wilderness League

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Senior Government Relations Representative  
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