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Conservation and climate groups call on USDA to end taxpayer subsidies for Tongass logging

Washington — A coalition of conservation and climate organizations have submitted a letter to U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, asking his agency to “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.”

The Tongass National Forest is the cornerstone of Southeast Alaska’s economy, attracting people from around the world for world-class recreation, hunting, and sport and commercial salmon fishing. In recent years, the tourism and commercial fishing industries that depend on a health Tongass have generated \$1 billion apiece in annual economic benefit. The timber industry, on the other hand, presently provides less than 1% of jobs in the Southeast economy. Despite that reality, the Tongass timber program has cost the American taxpayer \$600 million in the last two decades. The letter states:

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.

Letter signatories include **Alaska Rainforest Defenders, Alaska Wilderness League, Defenders of Wildlife, Earthjustice, Environment America, National Audubon Society, Natural Resources Defense Council, Sierra Club (British Columbia), Sitka Conservation Society, The Wilderness Society, Women’s Earth and Climate Action Network.**

The Tongass is not only America’s largest national forest and a treasured public lands area, but also ‘America’s Climate Forest.’ The Tongass stores 8% of the carbon of all forests in the lower 48 combined, according to a [report](#) by the U.S. Forest Service — it stores more than 1.5 billion metric tons of CO₂-eq and sequesters an additional 10 million metric tons each year, according to a [report](#) by Center for American Progress. [Research](#) by the Forest Service found that for each acre of old-growth forest harvested, 70 metric tons of CO₂-eq are released. In addition to the cost to taxpayers, the continued



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loss of this old-growth forest would degrade the enormous carbon sink and the benefits it provides — restoring protections must be prioritized. To this end, the letter states:

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.

[You can read the full letter here.](#)

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Alaska Wilderness League stands with, serves and supports the many people and organizations that believe in a sustainable future for Alaska. We honor and respect the cultures of Alaska Natives whose way of life remains deeply connected to the state’s land, waters, and wildlife. We believe that Alaska’s long-term economic future and subsistence traditions are inexorably tied to the health and sound stewardship of its natural resources, which support hunting, fishing, tourism and unrivaled outdoor experiences that are central to Alaskans’ quality of life.



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