

Biden Administration announces steps to restore National Forest Roadless Area protections for nine million acres of old-growth forest

Proposal to protect ancient forests and address climate impacts in Alaska's Tongass National Forest relevant to Washington State

WASHINGTON, D.C. –Today, the Biden Administration announced steps to restore national forest roadless area protections in Alaska's Tongass National Forest. The proposal is a repeal of the Trump Administration's 2020 Alaska Roadless Rule, which stripped away long-standing protections under the 2001 Roadless Rule, a federal safeguard that restricts logging and roadbuilding in designated wild areas.

A 60-day comment period will begin on November 23, 2021 with the publication of a proposal to reinstate protections for 9 million acres of National Forest which were repealed by the Trump Administration last year.

Today's announcement is an eagerly anticipated follow-up to President Biden's announcement on July 15, 2021, introducing his *Southeast Alaska Sustainability Strategy*, a plan that would reinstate previous Roadless Rule protections and add additional safeguards to Alaska's Tongass National Forest, including \$25 million in federal spending on local sustainable development, Tribal-led partnerships, and an end to large-scale logging of old-growth timber across the forest's entire 16 million acres.

"After overwhelming public opposition to repealing roadless area protections in the Tongass, the Trump Administration rushed forward with a decision to repeal protections for ancient forests, clean water and wildlife habitat that have been in place for two decades," said Tom Uniack, Executive Director of Washington Wild. "We appreciate that the U.S. Forest Service is now working to restore the Roadless Rule for nine million acres of wildlife habitat, clean water sources, and ancient forests.

Conserving old-growth forests in the Tongass and similar carbon-rich mature and old-growth forests in Roadless protected areas across Washington state is one of the single biggest and boldest steps the Administration can take to address the climate change and biodiversity crises. For two decades, the Roadless Rule has protected old-growth forests and critical wildlife habitat in Alaska and across the country including 2 million acres in Washington state. Protecting these trees, which are champions at absorbing carbon, has helped make the Tongass a buffer against climate change.

The decision comes as a reversal of the Trump Administration's biggest decisions regarding public lands. It also marks a halting of significant future carbon emissions. The Tongass — and similar old-growth forests here in Washington — act as "carbon sinks" by pulling and storing carbon from the atmosphere. The Tongass plays a critical role in our efforts to fight climate change. While Washington has taken bold action to stop climate change, the fight does not end at our borders. The Tongass is one of the United States' most important carbon sinks, storing more carbon than any other national forest in the country. The Tongass accounts for approximately 8% of carbon sequestered by all national forests, making its conservation a national and global issue.

As a key part of the *Southeast Alaska Sustainability Strategy*, USDA will end large-scale old growth timber sales on the Tongass National Forest and will instead focus management resources to support forest restoration, recreation and resilience, including for climate, wildlife habit, and watershed improvement.

"The areas of our national forests without roads are often some of the best habitats for fish and wildlife," said John McGlenn, President of Washington Wildlife Federation which represents hunters and anglers around the state. "These refuges are critical to ensuring that we are able to pass on this legacy to future generations."

There is a special connection between Washington State and southeast Alaska. The Tongass National Forest is the same distance from Washington State as Boise ID. On Alaska Airlines alone, there are 24 daily nonstop flights between Seattle and the southeast Alaska communities of Sitka, Ketchikan and Juneau. Additionally, five major cruise lines offer 80 cruises departing from Seattle to the inside passage, the Tongass National Forest, and Glacier Bay National Park each summer. A significant number of commercial fishing permits held in Southeast and offshore waters in Alaska are held by fisherman with home ports in Seattle's Fisherman's Terminal or Westport.

Here in Washington State, we have just over 2 million acres of roadless areas, including places like South Quinault Ridge on the Olympic Peninsula, the Dark Divide in southwest Washington, and the Kettle Range in the eastern part of the state. They are a critical part of the quality of life we have come to expect. Roadless forests provide much of our clean and safe drinking water, protect fish and wildlife, and provide amazing back country recreation experiences.

Washington's roadless forests also provide popular recreational activities like hiking, climbing, paddling, hunting, fishing, camping, skiing, horseback riding and mountain biking that add to the unique quality of life we all enjoy here in the Washington State. These incredible landscapes also inspire homegrown companies like REI, Filson, and many other local businesses that provide recreation gear and outdoor recreation opportunities.

"These wild places are the lifeblood of our local economy," said Lance Reif, owner of Wildwater River Guides in Leavenworth, WA. "Roadless areas provide the reasons why so many of us choose to live work and play here in the Evergreen State."

Over the last three years, the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest has already greenlighted two projects that allow new road building in inventoried roadless areas, the Olivine Mine and Excelsior Mine Expansions. Continuing to allow roadbuilding in roadless areas and allowing statewide exemptions sets a dangerous precedent for the future management of the Forest and in Roadless Areas. This puts clean water, backcountry recreation, ancient forests and wildlife habitat at risk.

More than 600 conservation, recreation, wildlife and hunting and fishing organizations as well as faith leaders, local businesses, breweries and elected officials from Washington State have formally supported the 2001 National Forest Roadless Area Rule and the protections it provides throughout the country. In Washington state, 45 breweries have weighed in to support protection of the Tongass via implementation of the Roadless Rule.

"Roadless areas protect the headwaters and the source of clean quality water for fish, wildlife, residents, and better tasting beer," said Jack Lamb, owner of Aslan Brewing in Bellingham and member of Washington Wild's Brewshed® Alliance.

Background:

In 2001 Washington Wild led statewide efforts to establish the National Forest Roadless Area Conservation Rule. Nearly 350 conservation and recreation groups, elected officials, local businesses, and faith leaders formally supported the nearly two million acres of roadless forests in Washington State. The Forest Service held more than 600 public meetings nationwide, including 28 throughout Washington State. More than 1.6 million Americans submitted comments, including more than 80,000 comments from Washington State citizens during the draft rule comment period. More than 95% of comments submitted were in support of protecting roadless areas.

The Roadless Area Conservation Rule is a popular and balanced policy that protects nearly 60 million acres of undeveloped national forests from road-building and other industrial activity. It was developed over two years and issued by the Clinton Administration in early 2001.

Roadless areas are important because:

- Sixty million Americans rely on **clean and safe drinking water** from National Forests. Roadless areas provide the purest source of water due to their pristine and road-free condition. In the Northwest Forest Service Region, which includes Washington and Oregon, drinking water on National Forest land is worth approximately \$941 million annually, which is more than any other region or state in the country except California.
- One of our best strategies in the **fight against the climate crisis** is to let old-growth and roadless protected forests stand. In doing so, we store more carbon, ensure clean drinking water, and protect the biodiversity and ecosystems that sustain our communities and economy.
- **Outdoor recreation** has become more and more popular over time as Americans participate in everything from hiking and camping, to hunting and fishing in Roadless areas. Each year the outdoor industry generates 26.2 billion in consumer spending and 200,000 direct jobs to the Washington State economy.
- A majority of the unspoiled **habitat for hundreds of threatened, endangered, and declining species** is found in Roadless areas. In Washington, 25 at-risk species, including bald eagles, steelhead and bull trout, and Chinook salmon are found in National Forests and could be harmed by the building of new roads and the ensuing destruction of Roadless areas.
- Roadless protections also make good economic sense by **saving taxpayers' dollars** on the cost of adding subsidized logging roads to the existing network of more than 300,000 miles of national forest roads, which have an unfunded maintenance backlog of nearly \$8 billion.

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