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ALASKA CONSERVATION COUNCIL • THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY

June 22, 2016

Dear Senator:

On behalf of our millions of members and supporters nationwide, we are writing to express our strong opposition to provisions in the discussion draft legislation, “Wildfire Budgeting, Response and Forest Management Act of 2016,” that could perpetuate harmful old growth logging on the Tongass National Forest, America’s largest rainforest. We urge you to reject this language, which appears designed to delay indefinitely a much-needed transition of the Tongass toward a more economically and environmentally sustainable future.

Title III, Subtitle B of the draft blocks critical management reforms for the Tongass National Forest in southeast Alaska. It prohibits the U.S. Forest Service from issuing a Record of Decision for the Tongass Land Management Plan (TLMP) amendment until the agency completes a burdensome and unnecessary inventory on second growth forest stands. Forcing this onerous inventory could indefinitely delay a transition of Tongass management away from harmful old-growth logging to a more diverse and sustainable local economy based on fishing, recreation and tourism.

At approximately 17 million acres, the Tongass is our nation's largest rainforest and encompasses some of the largest remaining tracts of coastal temperate rainforests left on earth. It provides valuable habitat for an array of species, including salmon, bears, wolves and some of the greatest breeding concentrations of bald eagles in the world. As an ancient, carbon-rich forest, the Tongass’ intact ecosystems help to moderate global climate change, providing important contributions to our country’s climate objectives. The extraordinary natural beauty and bounty of the Tongass supports thousands of jobs in the tourism, recreation and fishing industries in southeast Alaska.

For decades, a heavily-subsidized old-growth timber program in the Tongass played a major role in the southeast Alaska economy, but today timber jobs in the region account for less than one percent of employment – under 200 jobs. Tourism and fishing are now the economic drivers, each contributing about one billion dollars annually to the local economy. One million people visit the Tongass annually, supporting more than 10,000 jobs in the region. The Tongass’ 5,500 salmon rivers and streams provide for an additional 7,300 commercial fishing jobs. These stronghold industries depend on the intact ecosystems in our nation’s largest forest and the fish and wildlife they support. The times have changed dramatically, and destructive, uneconomical old-growth logging cannot be reconciled with modern social and economic realities.

In 2010, Secretary of Agriculture Vilsack affirmed the need to move rapidly towards more ecologically, socially, and economically sustainable forest management practices on the Tongass, and directed the Forest Service to transition the Tongass timber program away from old growth logging. The TLMP planning process is an important opportunity for the agency to act on this directive and

effect the long-needed transition to genuinely sustainable forest management that supports the diverse economies of southeast Alaska.

In late 2015, the Forest Service released a draft environmental impact statement to amend the TLMP. More than 165,000 people submitted comments on the draft amendment, providing the agency ample input to make improvements and to finalize the plan within its established timeline. And while conservation groups and others used that opportunity to urge the Forest Service to implement a more rapid transition out of old-growth logging, for Congress to adopt the approach in Title III, Subtitle B seeks the opposite effect, further delaying needed action by an administrative agency. There is no place in this bill for such a harmful, unrelated provision designed to derail the public process established by existing law, especially for the sake of thwarting the long-overdue effort to phase out old-growth logging on America's premier rainforest.

We urge you to oppose any legislative effort to delay the much-needed transition out of old growth logging on the Tongass National Forest. The attack on the Tongass, however, is not the only concern we have with the draft wildfire proposal. We also urge you to oppose anything short of a comprehensive response to the challenge of fire funding and to reject efforts to tack on destructive forest management provisions that promote ill-conceived logging across our entire public forest system.

Thank you for your consideration of our views on this matter.