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Subject: Ban to be proposed on road building in Tongass rainforest

Biden officials to propose road ban on much of Alaska's Tongass National Forest

The move would restrict development on roughly 9.3 million acres in North America's largest temperate rainforest, according to those briefed on the plan, reversing Trump

*By Juliet Eilperin
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For two decades, Republicans and Democrats have fought over whether to ban roads on more than 9 million acres of Alaska's Tongass National Forest. Now, the Biden administration aims to settle the question once and for all. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack will propose reinstating a Bill Clinton-era rule to ban logging and road building in more than half of North America's largest temperate rainforest, the department confirmed.

The restrictions had managed to stay in place for years because of a series of court battles, but the Trump administration wiped them out last fall. "Restoring the Tongass' roadless protections supports the advancement of economic, ecologic and cultural sustainability in Southeast Alaska in a manner that is guided by local voices," Vilsack said in a statement, adding that the rule reflects the input of Alaska's tribal and community leaders "and builds on the region's economic drivers of tourism and fishing."

The proposed rule would protect critical habitat and prevent the carbon dioxide trapped in the forest's ancient trees from escaping into the atmosphere, but Alaska's governor and congressional delegation say it would hurt the timber industry. Alaska Native leaders, environmentalists and tour operators argue that protecting the region's remaining wild landscapes will sustain the state's economy in the long term.

Marina Anderson, tribal administrator for the Organized Village of Kasaan, said in a phone interview that her village supported the rule since it was enacted in 2001. "Having protections for close to 10 million acres of old

growth means that we have the resources needed to continue teaching our traditional practices, continue harvesting our traditional foods and medicines and to not only prosper as Indigenous people, but to come to the world's aid right now so people can learn our ways of living and our ways of being," Anderson said. "In the future, we would hope that tribal governments are listened to, and properly consulted with, in the beginning."

The rule, which will be published Tuesday, will be subject to 60 days of public comment before being finalized. The administration announced in July that it would end large-scale old-growth logging on the 16.7 million-acre forest, which still boasts roughly 5 million acres of prime old-growth habitat while continuing to auction off tracts of younger which still boasts roughly 5 million acres of prime old growth habitat, while continuing to auction off tracts of younger trees. The Clinton administration enacted the roadless rule to protect undeveloped stretches of national forest not just in Alaska but throughout the West, covering a total of 58.5 million acres. While some modifications have been made in a handful of states, such as Idaho and Colorado, it has remained largely intact since 2001.

Roads fragment habitat and make it easier to remove some of a forest's most prized trees, which also provide habitat for wildlife, keep streams cool and prevent soil erosion. While Clinton officials identified the Tongass as deserving protection because of its vibrant and lucrative wild salmon runs, many scientists and conservationists have argued in recent years that policy-makers need to protect its old growth to prevent the carbon they store from being released once they're felled. The trees there absorb at least 8 percent of the carbon stored in the entire Lower 48 states' forests combined.

But Alaska Gov. Mike Dunleavy (R) and the state's three-person congressional delegation lobbied President Donald Trump to exempt their state from the roadless rule. After Biden officials indicated this summer they would take steps to limit development in the Tongass, Dunleavy said the previous administration had proven its move was justified.

"Our state's southeast communities need fundamental access, like roads, and the economic and resource development opportunities roads provide. Every Alaskan deserves the chance to work," he said. "We have the resources. We just need the opportunity."

More than 95 percent of the comments the Trump administration received while crafting its rule supported keeping the 2001 rule in place. A broad coalition of tribal leaders, outdoor recreation businesses and conservationists in southeast Alaska have fought to preserve the region's remaining cedar, hemlock and Sitka spruce trees. The area's economy was battered by the pandemic last year and is just beginning to recover, according to the Southeast Conference, a regional business group. The tourism and seafood industries ranked as the region's second and third most important source of jobs and income last year, according to the conference's most recent report. The timber industry employed 272 people in 2020, while the visitor industry generated nearly 4,023 — 15 times as many direct jobs.

Timber harvesting boomed in the region starting in the 1950s, when pulp mills operated and loggers from around the country flocked to the Tongass to earn a living. But it started declining in the 1980s, and now just one large sawmill operates on Prince of Wales Island, which used to be the epicenter of logging in the forest. Because it often costs more to transport logs from Alaska to other markets, one of the state's biggest competitive advantages has been the fine quality of grain that its old growth offered.

According to Taxpayer for Common Sense analysis of the Forest Service's accounts, the Tongass timber program has lost roughly \$1.7 billion over the past 40 years because the federal government pays to make leased areas accessible. Many tribal corporations clear-cut their own lands, even as the federal government sold off timber rights on public lands. But now many Alaska Native leaders are pressing for an end to old-growth logging and restrictions on development to preserve the large trees that are foundational to their culture.

The Tlingit and Haida tribes have spent centuries foraging in the forest, using red cedar for totem poles, yellow cedar for weaving and other woods for everything from jelly to fishing gear. Gloria Burns, a skilled weaver and president of the Ketchikan Indian community, said in a recent phone interview that she and others have worked to reclaim their heritage over time, and have been teaching younger people in the community how to identify the best trees remaining in the forest. Rosita Worl, president of the Sealaska Heritage Institute, said in an interview this summer that the region's Alaska Natives are now working to earn income through

conservation, by selling credits to companies for the carbon stored in old-growth trees.

“We were trying to figure out how do we meet our core cultural values, for future generations,” she said.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2021/11/18/tongass-national-forest-roadless-rule/>