



News Release

Alaska Region

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE FOREST SERVICE

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Bush Administration Makes First Wilderness Recommendation for Alaska's Chugach National Forest

Petersburg, Alaska, May 17 – USDA Forest Service's Alaska Regional Office today announced the first wilderness recommendation by an Administration in more than a decade. The Chugach National Forest, in its upcoming forest plan revision record of decision, will include a recommendation of more than 1.4 million acres for wilderness designation, which would make up 25 percent of the forest. The Chugach, the second largest national forest at 5.5 million acres, currently has no existing wilderness designation.

The Forest Service also announced its wilderness recommendation for the Tongass National Forest--a forest with 40 percent or 6,635,000 acres receiving special designation from Congress, including wilderness and national monuments areas. The Tongass National Forest, in its upcoming draft supplemental environmental impact statement, includes no additional acreage recommended for wilderness outside the more than 5.7 million currently designated by Congress.

For more than a century, the Chugach has provided outstanding fish and wildlife habitat and more recently, world-class recreation and tourism opportunities. The revised forest plan will continue to emphasize protection and improvement of fish and wildlife habitat while enhancing quality recreation and tourism opportunities.

“From the unprecedented, open public participation process during the five-year revision, I learned the public has an overwhelming desire to keep the forest as it is today--wild in character,” said Alaska Regional Forester Denny Bschor. “This wild character refers to the undeveloped nature of the forest, which is currently about 99 percent unroaded. The revised forest plan will sustain the ecosystems and human uses of the Chugach.”

Key decisions in the Chugach plan will include:

- A recommendation to Congress to designate 1.4 million acres in Prince William Sound as wilderness--about 25 percent of the forest.
- Continued conservation of fish and wildlife on the Copper River Delta, a Western Hemispheric Shorebird Reserve, as directed by Congress in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980. The revised forest plan includes additional standards to protect fish, such as the world-renowned Copper River red salmon, and wildlife, such as dusky Canada geese, trumpeter swans and millions of migrating shorebirds.

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- An allocation of about 82 percent of the forest on the Kenai Peninsula for winter motorized activities.
- Guidance for restoring healthy forests in areas with extensive spruce bark beetle-killed trees, resulting in reduced fire hazard near forest communities surrounded by beetle-killed timber.
- Full protection of subsistence uses on the forest, including traditional access.

For more information on the Chugach forest plan revision record of decision, including background, maps, and a printing schedule for the record of decision, go to <http://www.fs.fed.us/r10/chugach/> and click on the button labeled “Forest Plan”.

On May 17, Tongass National Forest Supervisor Tom Puchlerz will recommend the “no action” alternative in the Tongass **draft supplemental environmental impact statement**, which does not recommend to Congress additional acres as wilderness designation.

“This alternative reaffirms with the 1997 forest plan revision, which was worked out with extensive public and congressional comment over nearly a decade,” said Puchlerz. “We recognize that many of our roadless areas have excellent wildland values while at the same time firmly believe that many of them are vital to maintain a predictable, stable land base for timber harvest and other development activities. This is critically important to the 73,000 people and 32 communities in Southeast as well as the nation.”

The Forest Service completed an intensive reevaluation of the current condition of the acres in natural land use. Eight different alternatives were developed and analyzed, ranging from no areas recommended to Congress for wilderness designation to 9.7 million acres recommended. In the current plan, about 330,000 acres of the 9.7 million acres are scheduled for timber harvesting over the next 100 years.

The public comment period will last for 90 days and will include numerous public hearings throughout southeast Alaska; comments are due August 17, 2002. Bschor will make the final decision on the supplemental environmental impact statement in the fall.

For more information on the **draft supplemental environmental impact statement**, including background, maps and hearing schedule, go to <http://www.tongass-seis.net/>.

In March 2001, the U.S. District Court, Alaska District, ordered the Forest Service to prepare an SEIS for evaluating and considering roadless areas within the Tongass National Forest for recommendations as potential wilderness.

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National Forest Wilderness Areas are designated by Congress as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System. More than 34.7 million acres of National Forest System land is currently designated as wilderness.

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Q & A's

TONGASS NATIONAL FOREST

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Release Date: May 17, 2002

SEIS Questions and Answers

Q. Why did you prepare this SEIS?

A. As indicated by the U.S. District Court for Alaska, we need to evaluate roadless areas in the Tongass National Forest and consider them for wilderness recommendations. The alternatives discussed below focus only on new wilderness-type recommendations. The SEIS does not consider other land allocation options, such as changing current non-development land use designations (LUDs) to development LUDs. Also, it does not explore new biodiversity or conservation biology strategies, nor does it represent a totally new Forest Plan Revision. Issues that could be related to these and other non-wilderness-type subjects can be considered during future forest planning efforts, which include a scheduled mid-plan review (approximately 5 years into the Revised Plan) and a review at about year 10 of the Revised Plan.

Land Use Designations (LUDs) are zones across the Forest that define the different management prescriptions of the Forest Plan. The timber production, modified landscape, and scenic viewshed LUDs allow timber harvest and road construction and are often referred to as "development LUDs." Most other LUDs do not permit scheduled timber harvest and are collectively called "non-development LUDs."

Q. How much of the Tongass National Forest is Wilderness?

A. The Tongass National Forest embraces 19 separate designated Wildernesses, encompassing 5,755,000 acres, or just over one third of the Forest. The largest single Wilderness is Misty Fiords, at 2.1 million acres; the smallest is the Maurelle Islands, at 4,937 acres.

Q. How much of the Tongass National Forest is Roadless?

A. About 9.7 million acres of the Tongass is Roadless. *An additional 5.8 million acres is Congressionally designated Wilderness, and 723,000 acres is in Congressionally designated "non-development LUDS".*

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Q. How much development has already occurred on the Forest?

A. Timber harvesting has occurred on about 400,000 acres since the Alexander Archipelago Forest Reserve (forerunner to the Tongass National Forest) was proclaimed by President Theodore Roosevelt on August 20, 1902. About 665,000 acres of the Forest is available for timber harvest under the 1997 Tongass Land Management Plan Revision. About 330,000 acres of that is within the 9.7 million acres of roadless lands on the Forest.

Q. How many timber sales will be stopped by this SEIS?

A. No existing sales will be halted. About 25 sales within Roadless areas are in various stages of planning. What will happen with these efforts will be totally dependent on the decision made by the Regional Forester when the Final SEIS is released late in 2002. *Five timber sales which are at least partly within Roadless areas were specifically allowed to continue under the injunction issued by the U.S. District Court for Alaska.*

Q. How up to date are your Roadless Area maps and descriptions?

A. The Roadless inventory map has been updated to reflect the most current land ownership information and the new developments (roads, timber harvests, powerlines, etc.) implemented since 1996. It uses a more refined mapping process that eliminates only the narrowest stringers of unroaded lands and more closely follows actual developments. All unroaded lands were identified and then stratified into three general categories: greater than 5,000 acres, between 5,000 and 1,000 acres, and less than 1,000 acres. This process allowed us to reconfirm the individual roadless areas included in the 1996 inventory and to determine if new individual areas needed to be added to the main inventory map. Changes from the 1996 roadless inventory map are now reflected in the new roadless area inventory map seen on our Web site and as included on Alternative 1 of the SEIS.

Like the inventory map updates, the individual roadless area descriptions have been updated to better reflect current conditions and Forest Service Manual and Handbook direction, and to improve the description of the various resources and uses associated with each area. This process includes a review and update of the Wilderness Attribute Rating System that was originally applied to each area in 1989, as well as how each individual roadless area could contribute to the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Q. How did you handle scoping for this project?

A. We looked at public input from more than ten years worth of planning efforts, including site-specific analyses on ranger districts, the Tongass Land Management Plan Revision, and the national Roadless initiative. Many individuals, interest groups, tribal and other governmental agencies, and Congress have expressed interest in the management of inventoried roadless areas on the Forest over the last several decades. In identifying potential alternative frameworks for the SEIS, we reviewed Congressional proposals for wilderness designation and protection proposals from the Southeast Conference, the Alaska Loggers Association (now Alaska Forest Association), Southeast Alaska Conservation Council, State of Alaska agencies, and others. We also examined specific values and attributes associated with various roadless areas as part of potential alternatives. This effort led to the identification of about 15 potential alternatives.

Q. What issues did you identify in scoping?

A. Scoping helps us identify or predict what resources or uses could be most affected by the recommendation and management of new wilderness areas. Any alternative that proposes new wilderness recommendations would be likely to create some changes in effects and/or outputs in relation to the existing Forest Plan. Our intent is to show these effects in the SEIS; however, some of these changes are more likely to influence the comparison between alternatives so more emphasis and analysis will be placed on these issues. The key issues can be summarized into two broad statements that relate to the positive and negative effects of new wilderness designation:

1. There is concern over whether roadless areas should be recommended for long-term protection through wilderness designation and, if so, which ones and how many should be recommended. This concern is based on the potential benefits of wilderness designation to recreation, wildlife, biodiversity, and other resources.
2. The designation of additional areas as wilderness would have social and economic effects, including those related to the recreation and tourism industry, the timber industry, the mining industry, and transportation and utility projects. This is a concern, especially relative to the well being of the communities in Southeast Alaska.

Q. What alternatives did you develop and analyze in the SEIS?

A. Seventeen alternative concepts were presented to the Forest Supervisor and his staff at a working meeting (which was open to the public) on November 19, 2001, in Ketchikan. Work at this meeting resulted in identification of eight alternatives that would be analyzed in more detail and represent the alternatives included in the SEIS. The eight alternatives represent a variety of approaches including the No-Action Alternative, which would have no new wilderness recommendations, and seven action alternatives, which would recommend anywhere from about 700,000 to 9.7 million acres as new wilderness. *One criterion considered in the Analysis was the Wilderness Attribute Rating System, which was developed by the Forest Service and special interest groups as a means to evaluate the wilderness characteristics of inventoried roadless areas. It is used to rate individual roadless areas based on the natural integrity of the area, its apparent naturalness as viewed by a visitor, opportunities for solitude, and primitive recreation opportunities. Because of Southeast Alaska's scale and grandeur, most areas rate high on this scale, as compared to areas in the lower 48.*

Alternative 1 – This is the No-Action Alternative. The framework is defined by the current Tongass Forest Plan, which is based on Alternative 11 from the 1997 Forest Plan Revision Final EIS, as adjusted by the 1997 ROD and subsequent non-significant Forest Plan Amendments. All existing LUD allocations would remain unchanged.

Alternative 2 - Alternative 2 would recommend approximately 721,000 acres for new wilderness designation. It would result in the conversion of all existing LUD II areas to the Recommended Wilderness LUD. As such, it responds to Key Issue 1 at a low level by recommending some new wilderness. It responds to Key Issue 2 at a high level by not affecting areas in development LUDs. In 1990, the Tongass Timber Reform Act established five new wildernesses, as well as 12 permanent LUD II areas. Under this alternative, the LUD II areas would be recommended for re-designation as wilderness. There would be no change to existing wilderness and all other existing LUD allocations would remain unchanged.

Alternative 3 - Alternative 3 would recommend approximately 1,076,000 acres for new wilderness designation. It would result in the conversion of areas to the Recommended Wilderness LUD that have a relatively high score in the Wilderness Attribute Rating System, along with relatively high public interest and/or high relative contribution to the National Wilderness Preservation System. In this alternative, there would be no change to existing wilderness and LUD II areas.

Alternative 4 - Alternative 4 would recommend approximately 736,000 acres for new wilderness designation. It would result in the conversion of non-development LUD portions of areas that have a relatively high score in the Wilderness Attribute Rating System, along with relatively high public interest and/or high relative contribution to the National Wilderness Preservation System. In this alternative, there would be no change to existing wilderness and LUD II areas.

LUD II is a special land use designation and currently applies to 12 areas identified by the Tongass Timber Reform Act. These areas are to be managed in a roadless state to retain their wildland characteristics, but, unlike wilderness, limited development is permitted, such as some water and power, mining, habitat, and transportation developments (under certain circumstances).

Alternative 5 - Alternative 5 would recommend approximately 2,005,000 acres for new wilderness designation. It would result in the conversion of all portions of the 23 areas proposed for wilderness by U.S. House of Representatives Bill HR 987 that are not already in wilderness, along with any additional areas identified by the 1999 Forest Plan Revision ROD as Areas of Special Interest, to the Recommended Wilderness LUD. Additional areas identified by the 1999 Forest Plan Revision Record of Decision as Areas of Special Interest, would also be converted to the Recommended Wilderness LUD. The areas included in Alternative 5 represent areas of high public interest for long-term protection of fish, wildlife, scenic, and recreation values. In this alternative, most existing LUD II areas would be converted to wilderness and there would be no change to existing wildernesses.

Alternative 6 - Alternative 6 would recommend approximately 3,222,000 acres for new wilderness designation and 5,641,000 acres for new LUD II designation. It would result in the conversion of all areas recommended for wilderness or LUD II by HR 2908 to Recommended Wilderness and Recommended LUD II areas. It would result in the conversion of all areas recommended for wilderness or LUD II by HR 2908 to Recommended Wilderness and Recommended LUD II respectively. HR 2908 is currently available for consideration by the House of Representatives and is referred to as the Alaska Rainforest Conservation Act of 2001. Three existing LUD II areas (Berners Bay, Trap Bay, and Kadashan) would be converted to wilderness; there would be no change to existing wilderness.

Alternative 7 - Alternative 7 would recommend approximately 4,653,000 acres for new wilderness designation. It would result in the conversion of all areas recommended for wilderness under Alternatives 4, 5, and 6 to Recommended Wilderness. As such, it recommends for long-term protection a combination of the areas with the highest public interests and other values on the Tongass. Virtually all existing LUD II areas would be converted to wilderness.

Alternative 8 - Alternative 8 would recommend approximately 9,680,000 acres for new wilderness designation. It would result in the conversion of all inventoried roadless areas in the current roadless inventory to Recommended Wilderness. Virtually all acres of LUD II would be included in this conversion. Under this alternative, there would be no change to existing wilderness.

Q. How does the SEIS relate to the ANILCA no more clauses?

A. The Federal District Court for Alaska ordered the Forest Service to prepare the SEIS. The SEIS considers recommending wilderness as a supplement to the 1997 Forest Plan Revision Final EIS. It is thus consistent with ANILCA subpart 708 (b)(4), because the 1997 Forest Plan Revision is a forest-specific evaluation and not a statewide evaluation. This SEIS is also consistent with ANILCA subpart 1326 (b), because the 1997 Forest Plan Revision is a general land management plan and not a single purpose study. Section 101 of ANILCA provides important congressional determinations, findings and information relating to additional wilderness in Alaska, and will be considered when we make the final decision.

Q. How is the SEIS affected by the Singleton injunction of April 26, 2002?

A. Federal District Court Judge Singleton's injunction of April 26, 2002 does not affect the preparation of the SEIS. This injunction has enjoined the harvest of timber and the construction of roads in inventoried roadless area of the Tongass National Forest. This injunction is to remain in effect until 45 days after the Notice of Availability of the Final Record of Decision for the Roadless Area Evaluation for Wilderness.

Q. Does Judge Singleton's April 2002 injunction allow any development activities?

A. *Any timber sale in roadless areas that was authorized before April 13, 1999 may proceed. This includes five sales totaling 62 million board feet that were specifically discussed with the court.*

Q. How is the SEIS affected by the Roadless Rule litigation?

A. The Tongass Forest Plan Revision analyzed and considered roadless areas as it was developed. It did not consider these areas for wilderness recommendations. The SEIS does this. Once the SEIS process is completed, future management of roadless areas will be determined and have the benefit of significant public involvement in that determination. Full implementation of the 2001 Roadless Rule would mostly affect the areas currently zoned to allow developments such as roads. These areas are considered fully in the SEIS.

Q. Why are no development LUDs considered for recommended wilderness within the range of alternatives?

A. Development LUDs that are in inventoried roadless areas are included in the range of alternatives. Alternatives 3, 5, 6, 7 and 8 include development LUDs.

Q. How much timber that is currently under contract is within inventoried roadless areas? How many companies are affected?

A. As of January 2002 there were 48 timber sales with approximately 321 MMBF of timber volume under contract on the Tongass National Forest. Approximately 66 percent of this volume is within inventoried roadless areas. Six companies are affected. *This 321 MMBF is less than a three year supply; a three year supply is normally considered minimal for normal business continuity.*

Q. Your planning participant letter lists the southeast Alaska communities that will have hearings. Can other communities request a hearing and will you honor that request?

A. We will consider hearings in other locations in Southeast Alaska if requested. If holding a hearing is not feasible, special provisions will be made to allow the affected individuals to have their testimony entered into the record of a hearing near their location. We want to assure that all residents of southeast Alaska have the opportunity to be heard.

Q. The public comment period is required to be 90 days. If I have to request a copy of the CD, I won't have 90 days to comment. Are you going to extend the comment period accordingly?

A. No. The public has had the opportunity to request copies of the Draft SEIS since last fall when the Notice of Intent was published in the Federal Register. The SEIS website opened in November of 2001 and includes the opportunity to request copies as well. The Draft SEIS is also available on the website.

Q. The public comment period is right in the middle of the summer when local southeast Alaskans are busily trying to make a living and, thus, will not have sufficient time to comment. Will you extend the comment period 30 days to compensate?

A. No. We have provided for a variety of means for southeast Alaskans to review SEIS materials and to provide input to the SEIS, ranging from paper copies of the SEIS and maps, electronic versions on CD and on the website. We believe that with all these means available, a 90-day comment period is adequate.

Q. Have you looked at Wilderness from a National perspective?

A. The court ordered us to look at the relative contribution to the National Wilderness Preservation System. We have analyzed inventoried roadless areas on the Tongass National Forest from local, regional and national perspectives. Viewed on a National basis, existing Wilderness on the Tongass represents 17% of all Wilderness on National Forest System lands and nearly 6% of the entire National Wilderness Preservation System. Each individual inventoried roadless area has been evaluated for its relative contribution to the National Wilderness Preservation System in Appendix C of the SEIS.

Q. Many believe that without wilderness designation all the old growth Forests of the Tongass will be harvested. How many acres of old growth are scheduled for harvest and isn't much of the old growth at low elevations already gone?

A. The Tongass has over 9 million acres of old growth Forest, of which over 5 million acres are commercial sized trees. The current Forest plan allows approximately 480,000 acres of that to be harvested. About 3 million acres of productive old growth below 800' elevation remains on the Tongass National Forest.

Q. What's my role as an interested citizen?

A. Read the materials carefully. Discuss your interests with others. Review the Tongass SEIS website (<http://www.tongass-seis.net/>). Then – write us a thoughtful letter, or an email, or a FAX, telling us how you think specific areas should be managed; providing us with new information we didn't consider; offering suggestions for how you think our final decision should turn out. Be specific and detailed. We know that many people support wilderness designation, and that many people oppose wilderness

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designation. We're not counting votes with this process – we're looking for input that has enough meat in it to really help us make good decisions.

Q. Where can I find more information on the SEIS?

A. We developed a Web site specific to the SEIS to provide background information on the project, an explanation of the planning process we are following, and roadless area maps at various scales and detailed descriptions of individual roadless areas. We continually update information to the Web site as it is developed, including the individual roadless area maps and descriptions. In fact, much of the information currently being posted is still in draft form. Our goal for the Web site is to provide you the opportunity to follow along with us as information is updated. The Web site also provides methods for you to offer suggestions throughout the development of the SEIS and will offer a convenient way for you to formally comment on the Draft SEIS after it is published.

The [SEIS Web site \(www.fs.fed.us/r10\)](http://www.fs.fed.us/r10) is linked to the main Forest Service Alaska Region Web page at www.fs.fed.us/r10 and the main Tongass National Forest Web page at www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass.

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Statistics

TONGASS NATIONAL FOREST

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Release Date: May 17, 2002

TONGASS NATIONAL FOREST INFORMATION

Category	Acres (000)	% of Tongass NF
Tongass NF, total	16,800	100
Wildernesses (19)	5,755	35
Inventoried Roadless Areas (115) (Includes 721,000 acres of TTRA legislated LUD II.)	9,670	58
Other Tongass NF	1,375	7
Non-forested Land (rock, ice, muskeg, lakes, etc.)	6,915	41
Forested Land	9,885	59
Significant debate has occurred concerning timber harvest activity on the Tongass National Forest. The following displays percentages of the Tongass affected by timber harvest activity including road construction.		
Total Area in which timber harvest is considered	3,620	22
Roadless acres	2,540	15
Currently roaded	1,080	6
Total area on which trees would be harvested	665	4
Total area on which trees would be harvested in Roadless	330	2

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