



File Code: 1950/1920
Date: February 24, 2003

Dear Planning Participant:

Over the past two years, we have evaluated more than 100 separate roadless areas on the Tongass National Forest for capability, availability and need for formal Wilderness designation. This study, ordered by Judge James K. Singleton of the U.S. District Court for Alaska, is documented in the attached Record of Decision (ROD) and Tongass Forest Plan Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS).

I have decided that no additional Congressionally designated wilderness is needed on the Tongass National Forest at this time. I have therefore selected Alternative 1, the No Action Alternative, for three primary reasons. First, almost 40 percent of the Tongass National Forest is already designated, by Congress, as Wilderness, National Monument, or to other special land use allocations. Second, most of the rest of the Tongass is managed to remain in a largely untouched, wildland state for the next fifty years, and the rest is protected by a body of law, regulation, and policy that assures its long-term sustainability. Third, the communities and their associated economies are changing rapidly in SE Alaska, and I don't want to make commitments right now that will pre-empt future decisions important to the people who live here.

The lack of a strong need for wilderness designation is the main rationale for my decision. Almost all of the Tongass National Forest land is wild, remote, untrammeled, and it will continue to be so. Currently, the Tongass has about 6.6 million acres of Congressionally designated wilderness, LUD II, and National Monuments (39 percent of the Forest). In addition, the Tongass has 6.5 million acres (nearly 39% of the Forest) in other Land Use Designations managed to maintain their natural settings, in which commercial timber harvest and road construction are not allowed. More than 90 percent of the Forest currently is in an undeveloped state. The wildlands on the Tongass today encompass an area twice the size of the State of Maryland.

In addition to the Congressionally designated lands found across the Tongass, there are another 24 million acres of designated wilderness adjacent to the Tongass National Forest in Alaska and Canada. This includes Glacier Bay National Park and Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, and the Kluane and Tatshenshini National Parks in Canada, which together comprise a 24 million-acre World Heritage Site.

The Tongass Forest Plan provides a balanced mix of land use designations with implementing standards and guidelines that make it a very "safe" Forest Plan with high levels of resource



protections and low levels of allowable human uses. The Tongass National Forest includes a large functioning old growth temperate rainforest ecosystem. The Forest Plan provides for one of the best old-growth conservation strategies in the world. It has been designed to assure sustainability through time, while allowing some development activities to occur that support communities in Southeast Alaska.

My decision does not change the 1997 Forest Plan Revision, so about 22 percent of the Tongass remains zoned to Land Use Designations that could allow development, such as timber management and roads. About four percent of the Tongass is potentially available for timber harvest, with about half of that within inventoried roadless areas.

The economy of Southeast Alaska is currently increasing its focus on recreation and tourism-related service activities. I am concerned that recommending additional wilderness now could limit future recreation opportunities, or create difficult management situations where recreation and wilderness objectives may be in conflict, especially in the short-run. For example, Congress considered designating the Juneau Icefields and Spires Roadless Areas as wilderness in past deliberations. Had they designated these areas, we would not have the helicopter landing tour businesses that are currently able to operate in these areas and provide world-class recreation and tourism opportunities, as well as generating local jobs and income.

This decision also allows local communities the flexibility needed for public facilities such as power lines, water supplies, and transportation systems on National Forest System lands. This is especially important because private land in Southeast Alaska is very scarce.

We appreciate the significant public comment we received on the SEIS. We received almost 175,000 letters, postcards, emails, and oral statements, which contained valuable information that has assisted us in making this decision. Much of the comment was specific to individual roadless areas or portions of them. I expect the Forest Supervisor to use the information received on specific areas as part of public scoping if the Forest proposes projects in those places.

Once again, thank you for your interest and involvement in the management of the Tongass National Forest.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dennis E. Bschor". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a professional style.

DENNIS E. BSCHOR
Regional Forester