



Roadless Area Conservation

Issue:

Protection of high value roadless areas on both the Tongass and Chugach National Forests is of local and national importance, particularly for wildlife and biodiversity, recreation, and tourism.

Background:

Inventoried roadless areas in the Alaska Region include 9.5 million acres (57 percent) of the Tongass National Forest and 5.4 million acres (99 percent) of the Chugach National Forest. In addition, congressionally designated wilderness makes up 5.9 million acres (35 percent) of the Tongass. The majority of the Tongass inventoried roadless areas (7.4 million acres) are allocated to non-development land use designations, with a total of 13.3 million acres (80 percent of the Tongass) generally off-limits to road construction and timber harvest activities. The 2002 decision for the Chugach Forest Plan recommends that 1.4 million of the roadless acres be added to wilderness, but Congress has yet to take action on this recommendation. Within the State of Alaska as a whole, there is an extensive network of federally protected acres. Federal lands comprise 59 percent of the State, and 40 percent of Federal lands in Alaska are in conservation system units (note: Texas is about 40 percent of the size of Alaska).

Recent History of Roadless Areas:

The Roadless Area Conservation Rule (roadless rule) has been the subject of several lawsuits since 2001. While the Tongass received more notoriety related to road building and timber harvest, this also affects programs on the Chugach, such as hazardous fuel treatments and approval of hydropower projects.

In a 2003 settlement reached with the State of Alaska and six other parties, the USDA published a rule that temporarily exempted the Tongass National Forest from application of the roadless rule until completion of a rulemaking process to make permanent amendments to the roadless rule. That temporary rule was included in the 2006 court order to reinstate the 2001 roadless rule with the Tongass exemption. In addition, the Forest Service published an advance notice of proposed rulemaking requesting comment on whether to exempt the Tongass and Chugach National Forests in Alaska from the application of the roadless rule permanently. No final rule has been promulgated.

Current Situation:

Recent directly contradictory court rulings have put the Forest Service in legal limbo, making it difficult for the agency to manage roadless areas anywhere in the country. On May 28, 2010, the Secretary of Agriculture issued a second memorandum (1045-155), continuing to reserve to the Secretary the authority to approve or disapprove the construction and reconstruction of roads and the cutting, sale, or removal of timber in those areas identified in the set of inventoried roadless area maps contained in the November 2000 EIS for the roadless rule. This memorandum affects only the process by which such activities are authorized.

The Secretary's Memorandum also re-delegates authority to the Forest Service to approve timber cutting or removal in certain situations such as: emergencies; incidental to implementation of an existing special use authorization; or cutting, sale, or removal of generally small diameter timber for specified purposes, such as wildlife habitat improvement and administrative and personal use.

Specific to Alaska, the Secretary has also re-delegated authority to the Forest Service to approve free use to Alaskan settlers, miners, residents and prospectors. Such use should occur in inventoried roadless areas only when needs cannot be met in the roaded land base. When personal use timber is collected from inventoried roadless areas, it shall be done in a manner that maximizes the protection of the roadless character and wildlife habitat, recreation and other values associated with roadless areas.

More Information:

Robin Dale, Ecosystem Planning Staff, (907) 586-9344.