



United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

OCT 30 2019

Mr. Andrew Thoms
Executive Director
Sitka Conservation Society
Post Office Box 6533
Sitka, Alaska 99835

Dear Mr. Thoms:

Thank you for your letter sharing your experiences and perspectives from your work on issues affecting Southeast Alaska and the Tongass National Forest. I apologize for the delayed response.

I appreciated you and other conservation and business leaders making the trip to meet about the impacts of resource management decisions on the land and water where you live and work. Our discussion about ways to move forward toward shared goals was thoughtful and productive.

As you point out, there has been disagreement about management of the Tongass National Forest under the national 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule since it was promulgated. In response to the State of Alaska's petition for rulemaking, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Alaska have agreed the economic, environmental, and social issues surrounding management of roadless areas on the Tongass National Forest warrant State-specific rulemaking. USDA is committed to conducting this rulemaking as expeditiously as possible. We will continue to provide multiple opportunities for Tribal consultation and public involvement throughout the process. Our goal for this process is a State-specific rule that addresses economic development, conservation, and other needs for this and future generations.

Publication of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement this fall began a 60-day public comment period, and the Forest Service will again host community meetings across Alaska and in Washington, D.C., to provide information and answer questions. Written comments will be accepted by mail, email, and through online portals.

I encourage you to continue to participate in this process by providing your comments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Sonny Perdue". The signature is fluid and cursive, written over a light blue background.

Sonny Perdue
Secretary



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“Protecting the natural environment of the Tongass while supporting the development of sustainable communities in Southeast Alaska – since 1967.”

August 23th, 2019

Dear Honorable Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue:

Greetings from Sitka, Alaska in the heart of the Tongass National Forest. I am writing to express my gratitude to you for all the effort that you put into working to find an option for an Alaska Roadless Rule for the Tongass that moves us beyond the long-term conflict. As director of the Sitka Conservation Society and a person who calls the Tongass home, I've put in years of effort to bring people together from diverse stakeholder groups to find common-ground solutions, I've served on Federal and State Advisory Committees, and I've supported Forest Service projects and initiatives with investment of staffing and funding. We face many challenges in rural Southeast Alaska and there are no easy answers for rural development, forest management, and in ensuring the long-term viability of our fisheries; it has been clear to many of us in the region that a long-term festering conflict over Tongass management only makes finding solutions to these problems more difficult.

I would like to tell you that after the meeting I had with you in March of 2019 together with the senior leadership of Trout Unlimited and Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, and Southeast Alaska Big Game Guide Keagan McCarthy, I felt very hopeful that we were starting a new chapter on the Tongass. I was extremely appreciative of the time and effort that you put into the issue. You had obviously done the research and knew the issues very well and expressed a desire to find a pragmatic, durable, and practical way to conserve the key salmon and wildlife habitat, ensure the opportunity for hunting guides and the visitor industry to do business marketing a “wild and pristine” Alaska, and continue to follow the Tongass transition framework—all while supporting the existing timber industry and supporting its modernization. It was clear to me that you are the right leader of USDA at this point and that together with Chief Christensen you were intent on improving Forest Service agency management and programs.

We are getting word in Southeast Alaska that the alternative developed from the input of the State of Alaska Citizen Advisory Committee, input from Tongass stakeholders, and agency experts, is no longer an option and that the agency/department has been forced to go in a different direction by short sighted and/or informed political direction. Of course that is disappointing to me and unfortunate and I fear it will be a decision that threatens good management, staffing, and on-the-ground conditions for sound forestry and land/resource management. Personally and professionally, I invested a lot of time and credibility into finding a compromise solution—at times to a degree of risk. My fears now however, are that agency staff and stakeholders are now going to be distracted and pulled into conflict. This will likely mean that the on-the-ground work that we all want to focus on and work to achieve is going to take a back-seat to legal fights and management will be directed more by attorneys than by experts and practitioners—not to mention where financial resources will need to be dedicated. I believe that we both share the opinion that this is a worst-case scenario.

I don't know what this development will mean for my organization. We have invested in collaboration and partnership with the Forest Service and have taken quite a different course than most other "environmental" organizations. If the issue turns into a legal battle, I don't know what role we will play or how much support there will be for the work that we have done over the past decade during an era where we helped pioneer and support collaboration. I'd like you to know that what we do want is to bring stakeholders and entities together to find the best ways to manage the resources of the Tongass, get work done on the ground, create opportunities in the rural communities of Southeast Alaska, and do it all in a way that conserves the fish, wildlife, and the critical habitat and most important places on the Tongass. You'll have a partner in us if there is still bandwidth within the agency.

Again, thank you for everything you have tried to do. We'll await the release of the DEIS and make our comments in the roadless rule process while at the same time continuing to work to develop on-the-ground young growth forest management projects, salmon habitat restoration, joint-investments in visitor industry infrastructure and sector support, and other rural development initiatives. I'll hope to be able to work with your office and staff further and we will continue to pursue partnerships with the Forest Service. Please let us know any ways that we can be of help.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Andrew Thoms".

Andrew Thoms
Executive Director
Sitka Conservation Society