



Alaska Roadless Rule – Rationale Summarized from the Final Rule Preamble

October 30, 2020

- The USDA believes that both roadless area conservation and other multiple-use values with important local socio-economic consequences are meaningfully addressed through local and regional forest planning on the Tongass, without the 2001 Roadless Rule prohibitions on timber harvest and road construction/reconstruction.
- The national rule's one-size-fits-all approach to roadless area management is not the best approach for roadless area management on the Tongass National Forest. Other states, Idaho and Colorado, have sought and been granted the opportunity for roadless management to be tailored to their needs.
- The Tongass National Forest was exempted from the 2001 Roadless Rule from 2001 to 2011. Even during that time, the forest continued to provide large tracts of undeveloped land for watershed protection and ecosystem health.
- The FEIS analysis reveals only a modest difference in potential environmental impacts between the 2001 Roadless Rule and full exemption. Out of 9.4 million total acres, only 188,000 more acres would become available for timber production, and road construction only is estimated to increase Tongass-wide from 994 miles in the no-action alternative to 1,043 miles in the final rule over the next 100 years.
- The USDA supports increasing rural economic opportunity, decreasing federal regulation, and streamlining federal government services. The USDA concludes in light of the FEIS that a policy change for the Tongass National Forest can be made without major adverse impacts to the recreation, tourism, and fishing industries, while increasing opportunities for community infrastructure, eliminating unnecessary regulations and supporting local timber and mining industries.
- The final rule does not authorize ground-disturbing activities, but instead offers greater flexibility in locating future development activities on the Tongass National Forest.
- Large tracts of undeveloped lands and watershed protections are provided by existing statutory and forest plan direction, including lands in designated Wildernesses and National Monuments. In addition, the TTRA (Pub. L. 101-626, Title II, Section 201) and the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015 (Pub. L. 113-291, 128 Stat. 3729, Section 3720(f)) designated approximately 856,000 acres as LUD II areas, which are managed in a roadless state to retain their wildland character. Approximately 3.6 million acres in key watersheds (defined in the Forest Plan as Tongass 77 Watersheds and The Nature Conservancy/Audubon Conservation Areas) are managed for no old-growth timber harvest and to minimize adverse impacts to fisheries. Management direction of LUD II areas and key watersheds would remain unaffected with the final rule.
- Under the final rule, long-term protection of productive old growth would continue to occur under the Forest Plan's old-growth habitat conservation strategy. Connectivity between old-growth reserves would continue to be maintained through Forest Plan direction for stream buffers, the beach and estuary fringe, and legacy forest structure. Under the final rule, the projected amount of old-growth harvest and percent of original productive old-growth remaining over the next 100 years would remain unchanged compared to the 2001 Roadless Rule (Alternative 1 – No Action).



- The State of Alaska maintains that the circumstances of the Tongass National Forest appear to be best managed through the local planning processes. The USDA agrees. The final rule would leave the roadless area management issue open for future consideration in the forest planning process. The forest planning process is more flexible than the 2001 Roadless Rule's regulatory approach, because plans are expected to be designed and attuned to local circumstances and are intended to be periodically reviewed.
- The 2001 Rule's prescriptive approach forecloses a full balancing of interests during future forest planning processes. The final rule will allow local decision makers the flexibility to address roadless management based on changed local conditions, new unforeseen issues, and take into account state and local economic development plans. In addition, the final rule will provide local discretion during future forest planning efforts to explore roadless area management alternatives, unconstrained by the 2001 Roadless Rule, with local stakeholders, communities, and tribal governments.
- The USDA recognizes that ensuring rural Americans can achieve a high quality of life is one of the foundations of prosperity. In selecting the final rule among the several alternatives considered, the USDA has given substantial weight to the State of Alaska's policy preferences as expressed in its Petition. The State of Alaska's preference to emphasize rural economic development opportunities is consistent with the findings of the Interagency Task Force on Agriculture and Rural Prosperity established by Executive Order 13790 issued April 25, 2017. The State of Alaska's views on how to balance economic development and environmental protection offer valuable insight when making management decisions concerning NFS lands within Alaska.
- The timber industry has historically played an important economic role in southeast Alaska's rural economy providing jobs in small and remote communities with high unemployment rates and limited employment opportunities. In these isolated communities, every job has impacts at household and community levels. Notably, the timber industry has faced sustained hardship during the past two decades, with rural communities suffering the socioeconomic consequences. The final rule will improve overall flexibility in locating timber sales. In turn, this would provide additional opportunity for the struggling timber industry and support rural communities with limited employment opportunities.