

**STATEMENT OF
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NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT of AGRICULTURE**

**BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
NOVEMBER 14, 2007**

CONCERNING

**H.R. 3560, SOUTHEAST ALASKA NATIVE LAND ENTITLEMENT
FINALIZATION ACT**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to talk with you today about a bill that addresses land claims in Alaska. I am providing testimony on behalf of the Department of Agriculture on H.R. 3560, the Southeast Alaska Native Land Entitlement Finalization Act. We recognize and support the need to finish existing statutory land transfer obligations to Native Corporations in Alaska, including Sealaska Corporation (Sealaska), and are committed to that goal. As part of the settlement enacted in the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) in 1971, Native Corporations were created and selected federal lands for conveyance. Sealaska is the regional Native Corporation representing Southeast Alaska and has received some of its entitlement under Sec. 14(h)(1) of ANCSA; however there are additional acres that remain to be conveyed from National Forest System lands. We defer to the Department of the Interior to determine the final allocation of acreage to Sealaska. For the reasons we have outlined below, we have serious concerns with this bill.

Background

Our testimony will focus on how this proposal relates to the management of the public lands of the Tongass National Forest (Tongass).

H.R. 3560

H.R. 3560 would direct the Secretary of the Interior to convey over 300 separate tracts of land within the Tongass to Sealaska.

The Forest Service has been engaged in a process to revise the original Land and Resource Management Plan on the Tongass for over 20 years with the goal of establishing economic stability to Southeast Alaska. Our current forest planning effort is drawing to a close in the near future and represents a balanced plan that protects wildlife and fish, and will provide a stable supply of economic timber to the local industry. Management of some National Forest System lands are currently encumbered by the ANCSA withdrawals. Finalizing withdrawals will simplify the future management of these lands.

The information and attached maps provided in the bill are not sufficient to accurately assess potential affects at this time. However, we have concerns with some of the selections that are proposed by this bill because the selections could remove key areas of land from the Tongass that contribute toward the goals of the land management plan and the scientific basis on which it is premised. We would be happy to work with the bill's sponsors to address specific tracts of concern. More broadly, it is essential that any legislation addressing Tongass land tenure issues includes language clearly stating that under no requirement of law would enactment precipitate another round of land management planning on the Tongass National Forest. If H.R. 3560 or similar legislation is to advance through the legislative process, we would like to work with the bill's sponsors to assure the legislation includes such language.

Through the court ordered Tongass Land Management Plan amendment process in which we are currently engaged, we have learned how important the sense of stability and resource access is to the 32 small communities embedded within the 17 million acres of the Tongass. Until the planning process is finished, the communities who depend on the forest for many aspects of their livelihood, recreation and spiritual well-being may experience additional long-term uncertainty. They have lived through years of timber

industry's decline, once the backbone of economic stability in this region. From them we have heard growing concerns over the distribution and viability of many wildlife species and changing attitudes about how the forest and its abundant resources should be managed. The completion of the Tongass Land Management Plan and its implementation is important for community stability, is important to taxpayers interested in assuring its implementation given its costs, and is important to the Forest Service's ability to manage the public lands.

Again, we support completion of the entitlement due to Sealaska as legislated in the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. We are willing to work with the Committee to resolve the issues I have discussed today. This concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.