

Trump pushes to allow new logging in Alaska's Tongass National Forest



The Situk Lake Trail in Yakutat, Alaska. (Paul A. Robbins/Forest Service)

By [Juliet Eilperin](#) and
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President Trump has instructed Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue to exempt Alaska's 16.7-million-acre [Tongass National Forest](#) from logging restrictions imposed nearly 20 years ago, according to three people briefed on the issue, after privately discussing the matter with the state's governor aboard Air Force One.

The move would affect more than half of the world's largest intact temperate rainforest, opening it to potential logging, energy and mining projects. It would undercut a sweeping Clinton administration policy known as the "roadless rule," which has survived a decades-long legal assault.

Trump has taken a personal interest in "forest management," a term he told a group of lawmakers last year he has "redefined" since taking office.

Politicians have tussled for years over the fate of the Tongass, a massive stretch of southeastern Alaska replete with old-growth spruce, hemlock and cedar, rivers running with salmon, and dramatic fjords. President Bill Clinton put more than half of it off limits to logging just days before leaving office in 2001, when he barred the construction of roads in 58.5 million acres of undeveloped national forest across the country. President George W. Bush sought to reverse that policy, holding a handful of timber sales in the Tongass before a federal judge reinstated the Clinton rule.

Trump's decision to weigh in, at a time when Forest Service officials had planned much more modest changes to managing the agency's single largest holding, revives a battle that the previous administration had aimed to settle.

In 2016, the agency finalized a plan to phase out old-growth logging in the Tongass within a decade. Congress has designated [more than 5.7 million acres of the forest as wilderness](#), which must remain undeveloped under any circumstances. If Trump's plan succeeds, it could affect 9.5 million acres.

Timber provides a small fraction of southeastern Alaska's jobs — just under 1 percent, according to the regional development organization [Southeast Conference](#), compared with seafood processing's 8 percent and tourism's 17

percent.

But Alaskans, including Gov. Mike Dunleavy (R) and [Sen. Lisa Murkowski](#) (R), have pressed Trump to exempt their state from the rule, which does not allow roads except when the Forest Service approves specific projects. It bars commercial logging.

In a statement, Murkowski said Alaska's entire congressional delegation and the governor have sought to block the roadless rule.

"It should never have been applied to our state, and it is harming our ability to develop a sustainable, year-round economy for the Southeast region, where less than one percent of the land is privately held," she said. "The timber industry has declined precipitously, and it is astonishing that the few remaining mills in our nation's largest national forest have to constantly worry about running out of supply."

Alaskan leaders have found a powerful ally in the president. Speaking to reporters on June 26, after meeting with Trump during a refueling stop at Elmendorf Air Force Base, Dunleavy [said](#) of the president, "He really believes in the opportunities here in Alaska, and he's done everything he can to work with us on our mining concerns, timber concerns; we talked about tariffs as well. We're working on a whole bunch of things together, but the president does care very much about the state of Alaska."



Trump expressed support for exempting the Tongass from the roadless rule during that conversation with Dunleavy, according to three people who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations. Earlier this month, Trump told Perdue to issue a plan to that effect this fall, these individuals said.

It is unclear how much logging would take place in the Tongass if federal restrictions were lifted because the Forest Service would have to amend its management plan to hold a new timber sale. The 2016 plan identified 962,000 acres as suitable for commercial timber and suggested no more than 568,000 acres of that should be logged.

John Schoen, a retired wildlife ecologist who worked in the Tongass for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, co-authored a 2013 research paper finding that roughly half of the forest's large old-growth trees had been logged last century. The remaining big trees provide critical habitat for brown bears, Sitka black-tailed deer, a bird of prey called the Northern Goshawk and other species, he added.

[Trump's intense focus on federal forest policy]

Trump has frequently talked with his advisers about how to manage the nation's forests and signed an executive order last year [aimed at increasing logging](#) by streamlining federal environmental reviews of these projects. The president was widely ridiculed after suggesting during a visit to Paradise, the California community devastated by a 2018 wildfire, that the United States [could curb such disasters by following Finland's model](#), claiming that nation spends "a lot of time on raking and cleaning and doing things, and they don't have any problem."

The president has peppered Perdue with questions about forest management and has indicated that he wants to weigh in on any major forestry decision, according to current and former aides. Trump wanted to deprive California of federal funds in retaliation for the way officials managed the state's forests, but he did not follow up on the plan.

One former Trump staffer, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to avoid retaliation, said forest policy has become "an obsession of his."

White House and Agriculture Department officials referred questions this week to the Forest Service, which declined to comment. But the three people who spoke on the condition of anonymity said it was forging ahead with an exemption at Perdue's instructions.

Chris Wood, president of the environmental group Trout Unlimited, joined with local business owners and conservation and outdoors organizations in urging federal officials to make more limited changes to the rule. He said the shift could jeopardize the region's commercial, sport and subsistence salmon fishing industry.

About 40 percent of wild salmon that make their way down the West Coast spawn in the Tongass: The Forest Service estimates that the salmon industry generates \$986 million annually. Returning salmon bring nutrients that sustain forest growth, while intact stands of trees keep streams cool and trap sediment.

Wood, who worked on the Clinton rule while at the Forest Service, said that in recent years, agency officials have "realized the golden goose is the salmon, not the trees."

"They need to keep the trees standing in order to keep the fish in the creeks," Wood said.

The question of what sort of roads should be built in the United States' remaining wild forests sparked intense battles in the 1990s, culminating in the 2001 rule affecting a third of the Forest Service's holdings in a dozen states. Some Western governors, including in Idaho and Wyoming, challenged the restrictions.

In some cases, conservationists and developers have forged compromises. A decade ago, Idaho officials opened up roughly 400,000 acres of roadless areas to ease operations for a phosphate mine while protecting 8.9 million acres in exchange.

But in Alaska, consensus has been more elusive, with many state officials arguing that the limits have hampered development.

The Forest Service has approved at least 55 projects in roadless areas, according to the agency, including 36 for mining and 10 related to the power sector. Most win approval "within a month of submission," according to an agency fact sheet.

But Robert Venables, executive director of the Southeast Conference, said permitting for some projects has taken years and made them too costly to complete. A proposal that would have lowered electricity costs in the Alaskan community of Kake by connecting its supply to neighboring Petersburg, he said, won approval only after a lengthy review, which imposed requirements that boosted the price tag into the tens of millions.

"The roadless rule has shown itself to be very arbitrary and cumbersome," Venables said in a phone interview. "Many projects have proven to be uneconomic because of the constraints here."

A number of businesses operating in the region back the current restrictions, arguing that the forest's rugged landscapes, abundant wildlife and pristine terrain draw visitors.

Dan Blanchard, owner and CEO of the adventure travel firm [UnCruise Adventures](#), said in an interview that when he was working as a boat captain in the 1980s, "we had a difficult time avoiding clear cuts in southeast Alaska."

"The forest has come back," said Blanchard, who has 350 employees and brings 7,000 guests to Alaska each year. "The demand for wilderness and uncut areas have just dramatically increased. Our view here is, there are very few places in the world that are wild. Here we have one, in southeast Alaska, and it's being put at risk."

How Trump may bulldoze 'America's Amazon'

By [Bill Weir](#), CNN Chief Climate Correspondent

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Tongass National Forest, Alaska (CNN)In the [hottest Alaskan summer on record](#), amid countless signs of a climate in crisis, a camera phone captured a Republican fundraiser on Kenai Peninsula.

Judging from the laughs and smiles, you'd never know that they are a few dozen miles from the Swan Lake Fire, now burning for over three months. But the mood is giddy because [a surprise caller is on speaker](#) -- President Trump.

Holding up the phone in one hand and swatting at late-season hornets with the other, Sen. Dan Sullivan nods and grins as Trump promises to fulfill a Republican wish list that environmentalists have been fighting for generations.

He mentions drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge way up north and building a road through the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge in the south. "King Cove Road! Yessir!" says Sullivan as Mississippi Senator Roger Wicker nods with vigor. Enter Gov. Mike Dunleavy, who has been bonding with Trump during Air Force One refueling stops, often bringing a list of rules and restrictions he wants overturned. With oil prices down, Alaska's budget is deep in the red and Dunleavy is looking for other industry to help. "He's a great guy," Trump says of Dunleavy over the speaker. "And he's doing something with your logging and all your other things. We're working on that together and that's moving along."

Check out [@SenDanSullivan](#) talking to [@realDonaldTrump](#) at an event in Kenai. He is standing next to Mississippi [@SenatorWicker](#). Trump called Wicker and then Sullivan put it on speaker phone. [@GovDunleavy](#) also makes an appearance. Legendary. [#akleg](#) [#akgov](#)



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While nature lovers and earth scientists have been fighting Alaskan politicians over ANWR and King Cove Road for decades, Trump's mention of "logging" reopens a different front in an old war because everyone knows he's talking about Tongass, the crown jewel of the National Forest system.

Spread across the islands and fjords of the Alaskan panhandle, Tongass is roughly the size of West Virginia, full of towering old growth spruce, cedar and hemlock, some trees twice as old as America itself. It traps and hold so much carbon, it's known as "America's Amazon."

The pristine wilderness holds a bounty of salmon, bears, wolves, eagles and whales living alongside around 70,000 people.



A brown bear carries a fish with a bald eagle perched upon a rock in the background in Tongass National Forest.

And in the little town of Tenakee Springs, the reaction is "one of shock and dismay." "After all the work that we put in to keep this area roadless and keep this as pristine as we possibly can," fishing captain Tuck Harry says as he shakes his head. "And would you characterize yourself as sort of a tree-hugging liberal?" I ask him.

He laughs. "No, not at all. Not a tree-hugging liberal at all," he says, looking across a mirror-flat Tenakee Inlet at hillsides once scarred by clear-cuts. He's been here since 1960, back when the Forestry Service treated Alaska more as America's lumberyard than sanctuary. In an effort to create jobs in the "Last Frontier," thousand-year-old forests were pulped into paper.

But after years of legal battles and negotiations, a Clinton-era "roadless rule" seemed to settle the issue, protecting Tongass from any new logging or mining interests. But Trump's fundraiser call last month confirmed [reports that he would encourage Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue to exempt Tongass](#) from the roadless rule, opening almost 10 million acres to development.

"As Governor, I've raised this issue with the Trump administration on numerous occasions -- each time underscoring the need to restore the Tongass' multiple use mandate to allow for activities such as tourism, timber, mining, hydropower and more," reads a statement to CNN from Dunleavy.



Alaska Gov. Mike Dunleavy met with President Trump aboard Air Force One on June 26 as the president's plane was on the tarmac in Alaska en route to the G20 summit in Japan.

But the former mayor of Tenakee Springs, Art Bloom, says it is impossible to have all of those industries in Tongass at the same time. Alaska has to choose.

"People on cruise ships don't want to look at denuded hillsides," he says "They come here because of what's still here. They wouldn't be coming here if it was a bunch of stumps."

Bloom, a fish biologist who came up to Alaska in the 70s and is now a commercial salmon fisherman, explains the importance of the land to the sea. Walking across the spongy forest floor, he says intact old-growth forest is the only reason Alaska has such a thriving fishery.



Art Bloom and his daughter Lindsay both fear changes to Tongass could be irreversible.

"Along the streams, the trees keep the water temperatures cool. So the salmon depend on the trees to reproduce. The trees depend on the salmon to

bring nutrients in from the ocean," he says. "You could never have this again once you cut it. It's going to come back as an even-aged stand that needs to be managed and that is a plantation and not a forest. And that won't support the wildlife that this supports."

His daughter Lindsay Bloom, herself a fishing captain and now a strategist for the Salmon State advocacy group, has her eye on the future and what she wants for her young children.

"First of all, health and wellness, and clean air, clean water and food supply," she says. "And then secondly, when I think about their future jobs, it's something they can do that regenerates itself. Like we're really proud of being fishermen, you know, because it's regenerative and multi-generational. And if we manage it right, we can do it forever." But she's worried that is now at risk.



Towering trees in the Tongass National Forest may be 500 or 600 years old.

Logger Gordon Chew acknowledges: "There's nobody in this town that a mile of road here or there would benefit more than me.

"A mile of road built into an area that's never been logged would be almost a lifetime of selective logging for me," he says.

Chew runs a milling company with his son. While he believes that old growth can be sustainably harvested one tree a time, he is terrified of a return to the clear-cutting days of the past.



Clear-cutting in the years before development was banned left slopes along the Inside Passage bare.

"When you build a road, you don't know what's going to come down the road. And the reason that you would build a million-dollar-a-mile road is to extract resources big time ... We're just very much against that," he says.

While fishing and tourism make up a quarter of southeastern Alaska's economy, timber provides less than 1% with a total of 354 jobs in 2017, [according to the Southeast Conference](#), a coalition of communities and businesses in Alaska. But much the way Trump has vowed to help the outdated industry of the coal miners in the Lower 48, Dunleavy seems determined to boost the number of lumberjacks.



The arrival of tourism cruise ships helped the forest, as visitors didn't want to see bare slopes, locals say.

"As a resources-oriented state, with the highest unemployment in the nation, we continue to work with our federal partners towards solutions that support economic growth and opportunity," reads the Governor's statement.

But fishing guide Tuck Harry urges him to take a wider view.

"I have many, many logging friends, but even a lot of them are now on the side of protecting the environment," he says with a gravelly growl.

"When I go down and talk to some of my oldest friends of 35 years, they can see what's happened. They can see the degradation of the streams down there. That's not what we want to have happen here," he says.

"So to the governor and the president, this is what I'm saying: Do not do this to us."