

Chelsea Goucher, Executive Director of the Greater Ketchikan Chamber of Commerce and 1st Vice President for Southeast Conference
Federal Lands oversight hearing on “State, Local, and Tribal Approaches to Forest Management: Lessons for Better Management of our Federal Forests”
September 29th, 2015

My name is Chelsea Goucher and I am the Executive Director of the Greater Ketchikan Chamber of Commerce in Ketchikan, Alaska as well as the 1st Vice President of the Board of Directors for Southeast Conference. This testimony expresses the careful thoughts of the Southeast Alaska business community on the United States Department of Agriculture’s management of the Tongass National Forest. Through my expression of these thoughts, I will make clear our support for any legislation that might authorize states to select and acquire National Forest System lands to be managed and operated by and for states.

The Greater Ketchikan Chamber of Commerce is a business advocacy organization comprised of over 225 firms in the Ketchikan area, including Prince of Wales Island. The Ketchikan Chamber endeavors to promote a healthy climate for business and industry in the Southeast Alaska region and across the State of Alaska. Southeast Conference is the regional economic development organization that promotes healthy, sustainable communities within the region and whose diverse members live throughout the Tongass. It is our belief that increased State ownership and management of our forest lands is integral to our respective missions.

The Tongass National Forest is the largest National Forest in the United States and consists of over 17 million acres. This federally managed forest comprises over 90% of the land in Southeast Alaska, 91% of which is categorized as roadless and therefore functionally unavailable for any type of development. The majority of land in Southeast Alaska is not managed for the economic benefit of those who live in the region and is often an obstacle to the private investment that is required for the survival of the region’s fragile, rural communities.

Equally problematic is the manner in which the federal government has heretofore managed those areas within the Tongass designated for development and, specifically, timber harvest. In recent years, the United States Department of Agriculture’s Forest Service has issued approximately 30 million board feet of timber per year via its timber sales process. This is well below market demand and is crippling to our region’s timber industry, which has already declined tremendously as a result of federal actions undertaken in the 1990s. Currently, the timber industry in Southeast Alaska provides less than one tenth of the jobs and revenues that it did at its peak. The socioeconomic impacts of this collapse are far reaching. Businesses from pulp- and sawmills to small retailers have been forced to close, resulting in fewer living-wage jobs, an unsteady population base, fewer children in schools, increased unemployment, and escalated rates of poverty and substance abuse.

While this mismanagement has not been intentional on the part of the United States Forest Service, it is the result of federal management policies and processes that are both inherently inefficient and premised upon avoiding the litigation that has become a common feature of timber sales in the Tongass. State lands are managed in trust and for the benefit of local stakeholders, whereas federal lands are at the mercy of overlapping regulations and burdensome planning processes that attempt to satisfy multiple interests but more often than not leave all dissatisfied. State-managed lands throughout the West consistently generate positive financial returns on taxpayer investment that are simply not realized on many federally managed tracts.

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In Alaska, a State Forest carved from the Tongass would allow the state timber sale program to harvest an additional 287 million board feet of timber each year, generating an additional \$15 million in revenue for the State of Alaska and its residents. Increased state management would streamline access to mineral resources by reducing the inefficiencies that accrue when permitting a project through the State of Alaska, on federal land, and, importantly, further the advancement of hydropower, wind, and biomass projects that produce cheap, green renewable energy—a resource that is not even recognized in the Tongass’ current land use designation scheme. Roadless inventoried, currently unproductive lands would become viable sources of state income and personal livelihoods. The positive socioeconomic impacts of these developments would be profound and benefit individuals across the region, from the State Forest worker and unemployed logger to the small business owner and young adult struggling to find a healthy purpose. It is estimated that State stewardship of even 2 million acres of what is now Tongass National forest would result in about 2500 additional jobs.

State managed lands are accountable to clear mandates and generate significant revenues for stakeholders while federally managed lands often lose taxpayer money and frustrate local development and community growth. In Alaska, we need our lands to work for us and we have a proven record of developing our resources without compromising the environment we cherish. The business community in Southeast Alaska, the Ketchikan Chamber, and Southeast Conference support wholeheartedly any legislation authorizing states to select and acquire National Forest System lands to be managed and operated by and for states and their residents.