

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

July 11, 2019

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary
The United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue,

As members of Congress interested in protecting our public lands and environment, we are writing to express strong opposition to efforts to roll back the Forest Service's Roadless Area Conservation Rule (Roadless Rule). Promulgated in 2001, the Roadless Rule enjoys, today as then, broad public support. Roadless areas protect clean drinking water sources for tens of millions of Americans, some of our most outstanding fish and wildlife habitat, cultural values and locations of great tribal importance, and recreational opportunities that generate major economic benefits for rural communities. Their protection nationwide provides bulwarks against climate change and unnatural wildfire spread, while saving taxpayers billions of dollars. The Rule incorporates—and the Forest Service has a consistent record of implementing—allowances for many kinds of localized commercial and management activity as well as public highways and other road construction that is genuinely in the public interest.

Of particular concern to us is the minimal level of public and tribal engagement and the expedited pace taken by the Forest Service in developing Alaska-specific Roadless Rule exemptions in response to that state's petition. Alaska's Tongass National Forest is our country's largest national forest at nearly 17 million acres, 9.2 million acres of which are protected by the Roadless Rule. This region is home to some of the largest remaining tracts of old-growth temperate rainforest in the world, and provides essential habitat for grizzly bears, wild salmon, wolves, bald eagles, and many other species.

The agency's scoping meetings in Alaska were characterized by an overwhelming majority of participants rejecting upending the Roadless Rule on the Tongass. The same was true of the only scoping meeting held outside of Alaska, in Washington, DC. Having public meetings in only Alaska and Washington, D.C. ignores the fact that the Tongass National Forest is made up of public lands cherished by all Americans nationwide. During the upcoming Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) comment period, we request additional meetings around the country, including in Seattle, WA, Portland, OR, Minneapolis, MN, Denver, CO, San Francisco, CA, Albuquerque, NM and Washington, DC, to provide the national forest's actual owners, the citizens of America, an opportunity to voice their opinion.

Along with holding meetings in locations that give people who care about the Tongass an opportunity to voice their opinion, we want to ensure those voices are not only heard, but are truly listened to throughout the process. We are concerned the scoping meetings did not provide those who attended adequate opportunity to have their comments formally recorded to ensure they were carried forward into the environmental review process. The meetings that will occur once a DEIS is released need to be structured so that people have an adequate opportunity to review the DEIS first, and then provide an opportunity to offer comments on the record, rather than just receive information.

In addition, we are extremely concerned the DEIS is scheduled for release in July/August 2019, which coincides with the peak fishing and tourism seasons, as well as the most important time for those participating in customary and traditional fishing, hunting, and gathering activities in southeast Alaska. We fear that people in communities and industries that depend on the natural forest landscape which are by far the largest economic drivers in the region, will be underrepresented if they cannot comment and attend public meetings due to the seasonal nature of their customary, traditional, and commercial activities. We therefore request that the comment period be delayed until after the fishing, hunting, and tourism seasons conclude, around November 2019.

We also believe the Forest Service has provided insufficient outreach and consultation opportunities for tribal governments. In an effort to adhere to a strict timeline, the Forest Service has provided little time for Tribes to participate as Cooperating Agencies and to review draft documents. Tribal engagement has been minimal and the Forest Service has not granted comment period extensions when Tribes have requested them. For example, the Organized Village of Kake—a federally recognized Tribe—was provided just two weeks to not only review a 500-page document outlining the options available, but also provide substantive comments within that timeframe.¹ It is unacceptable for the Forest Service to neglect Tribes' reasonable requests for extensions during an arbitrarily expedited rulemaking process. We ask that the Forest Service conduct a more robust tribal consultation process and provide the Tribes extensions unless the Forest Service can demonstrate an extension would hinder the review process.

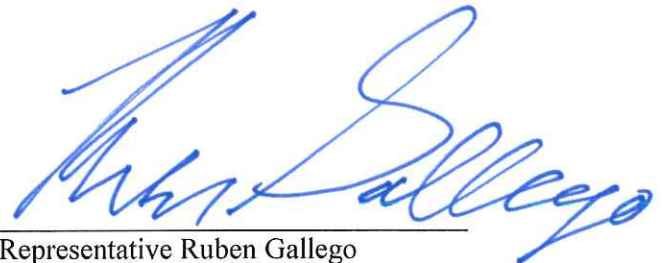
Given the widespread cultural, economic, and environmental impacts of such a decision, and the lack of any fact-based urgency about reducing recently-reaffirmed application of the Roadless Rule to the Tongass, the Department should significantly expand the scope of its engagement and ensure a more robust public comment period. To ensure this occurs, we ask the Department to delay the release of the Alaska DEIS until after the summer season in order to adequately engage people who are actively gathering food or work in fishing and tourism industries in the summer, and we ask the Department provide no less than 120 days for public comment on the DEIS. It is critical that all those affected by this dangerous proposal have an opportunity to be heard.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Maria Cantwell
United States Senator



Representative Ruben Gallego
Member of Congress

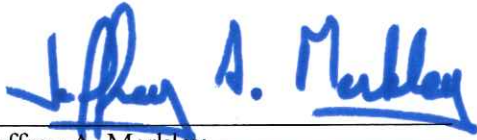


Tom Udall
United States Senator



Representative Raúl M. Grijalva
Member of Congress

¹ Jenkins, Elizabeth. "The Alaska Roadless Rule decision is moving along. Some tribal governments say it's moving too fast." *Alaska Public Media*. March 14, 2019. Available at: <https://www.alaskapublic.org/2019/03/14/the-alaska-roadless-rule-decision-is-moving-along-some-tribal-governments-say-its-moving-too-fast/>.



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



Representative Diane DeGette
Member of Congress



Representative Debra A. Haaland
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Representative Jared Huffman
Member of Congress



Representative Alan S. Lowenthal
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