

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

January 24, 2022

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We write today in support of reinstating safeguards for the more than 9 million acres of National Forest System lands in the Tongass National Forest in Alaska. Restoring Roadless Rule protections in the Tongass will support regional economic growth, boost outdoor recreation opportunities, protect irreplaceable wildlife habitat, provide enduring climate benefits, and uphold Indigenous rights.

We agree with the conclusion of the Administration and the Courts that the process undertaken by the previous Administration to revoke the Roadless Rule was rushed and opaque, and that it ignored the input of Alaska Native Tribes and local communities. That is why we were encouraged by the Department's July announcement that it would be fully reinstating the Roadless Rule as part of the Southeast Alaska Sustainability Strategy (SASS), which rightfully refocuses agency resources on higher-value restoration and recreation initiatives over historically wasteful and destructive logging projects. The SASS fortifies the local Alaska economy which is dominated by sustainable fishing and tourism industries that rely on intact Tongass ecosystems. In addition to protecting jobs, a full reinstatement will save taxpayers an average of \$30 million annually that the Forest Service has been spending to subsidize the small remaining timber industry in Southeast Alaska.

The SASS and Roadless Rule reinstatement would also support the cultural and subsistence needs of local Indigenous communities. Roadless areas of the Tongass are traditional homelands to Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian Alaska Native communities who rely on undisturbed lands and waters for their culture, subsistence, and livelihoods. We trust that under your leadership, the Department will honor the request of Alaska Native peoples to protect the Tongass and work with them to implement the priorities of Indigenous groups, including full government-to-government consultation throughout the development of the SASS and the restoration of the Roadless Rule.

The Forest Service also has a duty to respond to the increasingly urgent climate crisis. With the Tongass holding the equivalent of nearly 10 billion tons of carbon dioxide, nearly two times what the United States emits annually from burning fossil fuels, it is essential that carbon remains sequestered and not released to the atmosphere. We appreciate that the Biden Administration has already committed federal agencies to increase forest protection over the coming decade in United States' "Nationally Determined Contribution" submitted to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. At the most recent Convention held in Glasgow, President Biden stated that "conserving our forests... is an indispensable piece of keeping our climate goals within reach." We believe following through on these commitments requires the full protection of the Tongass and its carbon-storing old-growth trees, as well as permanent implementation of the SASS to end large-scale old growth logging.

Given the many public benefits to protecting the Tongass and fully reinstating the Roadless Rule, it is not surprising that this issue enjoys bipartisan backing. The original Roadless Rule was implemented in 2001 with unprecedented public support for protecting some of our nation's most pristine public lands, including large parts of the Tongass National Forest. That wide bipartisan favorability continues today. In fact, 96 percent of the people who participated in the recent public comment period on the rollback of the rule in Alaska expressed support for maintaining the protections. In the last two fiscal years, House-passed Interior and Environment Appropriations bills have limited funding for new logging roads in the Tongass, while bicameral legislation has been introduced to codify the protections afforded under the 2001 Roadless Rule, including in the Tongass National Forest.

For all of these reasons, we urge the Administration to swiftly reinstate the Alaska Roadless Rule. We look forward to working together on this issue and broader efforts to improve federal forest policy, fight climate change, and uphold our responsibilities to Indigenous communities.

Sincerely,



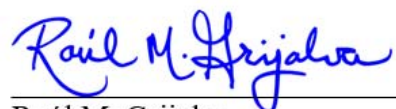
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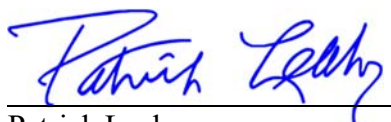
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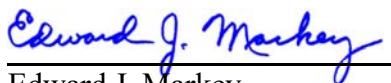
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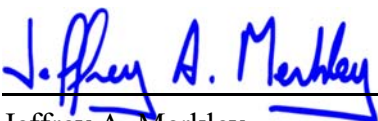
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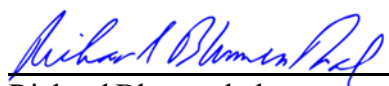
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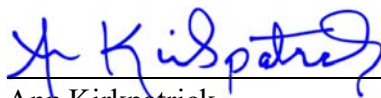
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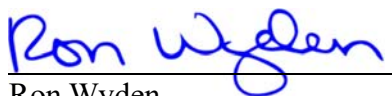
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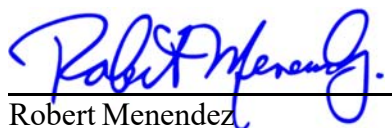
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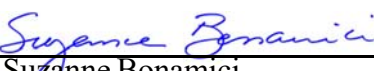
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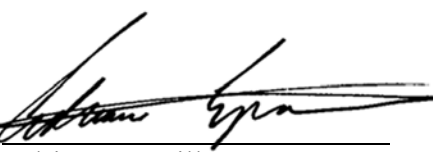
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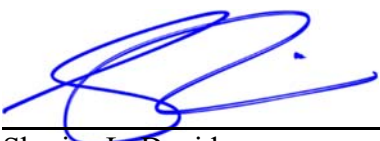
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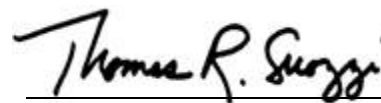
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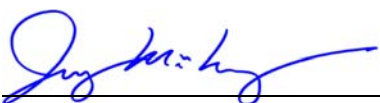
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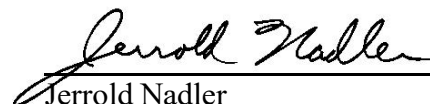
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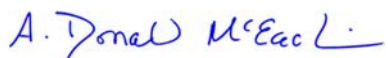
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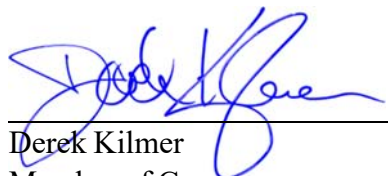
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