

LISA MURKOWSKI, Alaska, *Chairman*

JOHN BARRASSO, Wyoming
JAMES E. RISCH, Idaho
MIKE LEE, Utah
JEFF FLAKE, Arizona
STEVE DAINES, Montana
CORY GARDNER, Colorado
LAMAR ALEXANDER, Tennessee
JOHN HOEVEN, North Dakota
BILL CASSIDY, Louisiana
ROB PORTMAN, Ohio
LUTHER STRANGE, Alabama

MARIA CANTWELL, Washington
RON WYDEN, Oregon
BERNARD SANDERS, Vermont
DEBBIE STABENOW, Michigan
AL FRANKEN, Minnesota
JOE MANCHIN III, West Virginia
MARTIN HEINRICH, New Mexico
MAZIE HIRONO, Hawaii
ANGUS S. KING, JR., Maine
TAMMY DUCKWORTH, Illinois
CATHERINE CORTEZ MASTO, Nevada

COLIN HAYES, STAFF DIRECTOR
PATRICK J. McCORMICK III, CHIEF COUNSEL
ANGELA BECKER-DIPPMANN, DEMOCRATIC STAFF DIRECTOR
SAM E. FOWLER, DEMOCRATIC CHIEF COUNSEL

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6150

WWW.ENERGY.SENATE.GOV

June 7, 2017

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue:

Congratulations on your recent confirmation as U.S. Secretary of Agriculture. As you settle into this new role, I look forward to working with you to address the many challenges and opportunities facing Alaska. I write today to remind you of the outsized role that one agency under your direction, the U.S. Forest Service, plays in my home state, and to outline some of the issues that will require your attention to help make our rural, forested communities great again.

As you will recall from our meeting prior to your confirmation, Alaska accounts for nearly 12 percent of all Forest Service lands in the nation and is home to the two largest National Forests in the system: the Tongass in southeast at 16.7 million acres (an area about the size of West Virginia) and the Chugach in southcentral at 5.4 million acres (an area about the size of New Hampshire).

Historically, the timber industry was the backbone of the regional economy in southeast Alaska. Today, however, timber jobs are at their lowest level in the last 50 years. Due to an ongoing decline in timber harvest from the Tongass and national policies from Washington, D.C. focused on roadless areas and old growth conservation, local communities now face unprecedented economic challenges that include declining populations, declining incomes, fewer job opportunities, and increasing energy costs. With just one percent of the land in private ownership in the southeast, the Forest Service truly holds the keys to prosperity for the 32 towns and villages in the region. Now, more than ever, a committed federal partner is needed to help unlock the Tongass's potential for Alaskans.

First and foremost, the Forest Service must provide greater access to our national forests in Alaska and the natural resources found there. The number one impediment to access is the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule (Roadless Rule). The 2001 Roadless Rule establishes prohibitions on road construction, road reconstruction, and timber harvesting on inventoried

roadless areas. In Alaska, there are 9.5 million acres of inventoried roadless areas in the Tongass National Forest and 5.4 million acres in the Chugach National Forest. Taken together with designated wilderness, nearly 93 percent of the Tongass and 99 percent of the Chugach is off-limits to development.

The application of the Roadless Rule to our national forests has been disastrous for the forest products industry. It has decimated the timber base identified as suitable for harvest, removing over 2.5 million acres of the Tongass's best commercial timber from the timber base and leaving just 270,000 acres open to timber harvest, and actual harvest levels have plummeted to next to nothing. In the Chugach, the Roadless Rule has ended any kind of timber program.

While the Tongass is probably best known for its timber resource base, the forest is also rich in energy and mineral resources that have also been impacted by the Roadless Rule. With even limited access, responsible non-timber resource development could help diversify the southeast economy and provide new opportunities for local communities beyond the fishing and tourism sectors that play a vital role for our communities in the area.

To start, the mineral resources on the Tongass are substantial. There are 52 areas, totaling 589,000 acres, within the forest that contain identified mineral resources. Of those, 377,000 acres have high mineral potential. In addition, the forest is expected to have undiscovered mineral resources across another 6.6 million acres. Many of these deposits contain minerals that are crucial to our economic and national security, including rare earth elements, for which we currently depend on other countries for 100 percent of our supply. The Roadless Rule significantly curtails access for mineral exploration and development and disconnects the communities from mining operations, preventing mining from playing a bigger role in the local economy.

In addition, the Roadless Rule has severely hindered all forms of renewable energy development. This, in turn, has put renewable energy and the jobs associated with it out of reach for many communities. Southeast Alaska has abundant water and steep terrain, making hydroelectric power a natural and affordable alternative to diesel generation. Yet hydroelectric projects require heavy machinery and equipment to build. Without road access, most of those projects cannot be constructed.

Road access is also significant for the construction, operation, and maintenance of transmission lines associated with renewable energy development. It is possible to use helicopters to construct transmission lines, but it is very expensive and often makes such projects cost prohibitive. Without the ability to economically construct and maintain transmission lines, most renewable energy project proposals simply do not pencil out.

The Roadless Rule has never made sense in Alaska. The appropriate balance between protection and development was determined long ago in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980. Alaska's congressional delegation and the State of Alaska have now spent over a decade fighting the Roadless Rule and for a time our national forests were rightly exempt from it. The Forest Service should recognize the challenges the Roadless Rule has

created in Alaska, and permanently exempt the Tongass and the Chugach National Forests from it, as the agency committed to do in the 2003 settlement of the State of Alaska's 2001 litigation.

Another barrier to accessing the Tongass and its natural resources is the 2016 amendment to the Tongass Land and Resource Management Plan (2016 plan amendment), which was approved on December 9, 2016 in the final days of the Obama administration. The 2016 plan amendment represents a seismic shift in timber management, seeking to transition the old growth timber harvest to an untested young growth scheme over a period of just 16 years. The 2016 plan amendment replaces the 2008 plan's allowable sales quantity of 267 million board feet (mmbf) with an annual harvest cap of 46 mmbf, with the objective of reducing the old growth portion of timber harvested to just 5 mmbf a year.

This transition to young growth management in 16 years has not been proven workable on the ground. Until it is demonstrated to work in real life, based on reliable on-site data and market analysis, it should not be implemented. I have long advocated that the Forest Service complete a comprehensive inventory of young growth in all age classes in order to know how much volume will be available – along with the characteristics of the stands – both now and over time. To ensure the continued viability of the timber industry in the Tongass, which is already hanging on by a thread, a comprehensive inventory and analysis must occur before the Forest Service locks in a timeframe for a transition to young growth. If such inventory and analysis does not support a young growth transition, the Forest Service should go back to work with Alaska's congressional delegation and the people we represent to develop a more viable approach to sustaining our economy in Alaska's southeast region.

Another concern with the 2016 plan amendment is that it creates new land designations called priority conservation areas and Tongass 77 watersheds, where old growth harvesting is prohibited. These new land designations further shrink an already small base of land that has been deemed acceptable for old growth harvest. These land designations were never fully analyzed in the NEPA process or vetted with the public at large through a plan revision process (that is not slated to begin until 2018.)

The 2016 plan amendment also creates more problems than it solves for renewable energy development. Some project types that are allowable under ANILCA and the 2008 Plan Transportation and Utility Systems Overlay Land Use Designation (TUS Overlay LUD) would now be nearly impossible to implement, as the 2016 plan amendment drops the TUS Overlay LUD and does not add, despite tremendous support, a Renewable Energy Overlay LUD.

As our nation's Secretary of Agriculture, your leadership and direction will determine whether the Forest Service provides opportunities for responsible resource development in Alaska, or continues to shut down major portions of our state's economy over our objections. With your assistance, including an exemption from the Roadless Rule and the revision of unworkable forest plans, we can create new opportunities for our struggling communities, provide good jobs for thousands of Alaskans, and still fully protect our lands and waters.

I appreciate your consideration of this letter. I would like to meet to discuss these issues in greater detail with you when your schedule allows, and I hope that you can travel to Alaska with me in the near future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Lisa Murkowski". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "L" and "M".

Lisa Murkowski
United States Senator