

S. 2554, ALASKA NATIVE LANDLESS EQUITY ACT

What the Environmental Community is Saying

THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY (TWS): TWS—one of the strongest advocates for protecting the Tongass National Forest—supports this legislation. Importantly, they make clear that protecting the Tongass and correcting this injustice are not mutually exclusive:

“While our defense of the Tongass continues, we must correct the injustices faced by certain Native communities in Southeast Alaska.”

They understand Congress’ error dating back to 1971:

“Five Native communities were wrongfully excluded from the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act when the bill was passed in 1971, and we must, at a minimum, support efforts to correct this.”

Perhaps most remarkably, TWS publicly acknowledges its previous opposition was wrong:

“We apologize to our Native partners for the hurt our past opposition to this bill has caused.”

And they express confidence that these lands will continue to be cared for:

“We trust in the communities of Haines, Ketchikan, Petersburg, Tenakee Springs and Wrangell to continue to steward this land as they have since time immemorial.”

THE NATURE CONSERVANCY (TNC): TNC, which has worked in Southeast Alaska and the Tongass for more than three decades, also supports this legislation:

“The Nature Conservancy supports efforts to right the injustice of exclusion for the five landless Alaska Native communities in Southeast Alaska. We see S. 1889¹...as an opportunity to correct for this inequity.”

TNC also acknowledges an uncomfortable truth:

“Too often, advocacy... has intentionally sought to undermine the rights of Indigenous Peoples in the name of conservation.”

And they urge Congress to respect and prioritize Native voices:

“We hope the voices that are most important...are not those of conservation groups, but rather, those of the sovereign nations in Southeast Alaska for whom this has been a generation-long injustice.”

SOUTHEAST ALASKA CONSERVATION COUNCIL (SEACC): SEACC, another longtime advocate for the Tongass, likewise supports resolving the issue:

“SEACC supports the efforts of our Alaska Native partners to advance a meaningful resolution to the claims of the landless communities.” (Alaska Public Media, Nov. 2021)

Bottom Line: The “landless” Alaska Native communities face an undisputed injustice. Nearly 55 years after ANCSA’s enactment, Alaska Native land claims cannot be considered settled until Congress fulfills its commitment to them. The conservation community has largely concluded that Alaska Natives’ equity and conservation can coexist in the Tongass and that transferring these lands—which amount to a small fraction of the forest—is not a “public lands giveaway” but the right thing to do.

¹ This bill was S. 1889 in the 118th Congress. It is now S. 2554 in the 119th Congress.