

**An Open Letter to Congress  
about the Tongass National Forest Recreation Program  
from Tourism Businesses and Industry Supporters**

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May 21, 2015

We are owners, operators, and supporters of southeast Alaska's tourism and recreation industry. As you consider and decide on how to appropriate taxpayer dollars, we ask you to make a smart and prudent investment in southeast Alaska by prioritizing funding for the Forest Service's recreation program, trails, and facilities. In particular we are deeply concerned about the years of declining investment for this important program in the Tongass, our nation's largest national forest. This is a trend which is in stark contrast to our industry's importance in the local economy.

The visitor services industry is southeast Alaska's largest private sector employer and one of the fastest growing sectors of the economy. Yet in the past 6 years, federal investment in the Tongass recreation program has declined by an estimated 42 percent, a significantly steeper percentage of funding cuts than what has occurred in USFS recreation program funding levels nationwide. Notably, the Forest Service's allocation of appropriated funding for the Tongass recreation expenditures is less than 10 percent of the Tongass' overall budget. By comparison the visitor industry is the agency's largest revenue producer generating, on average, approximately 50 percent of Tongass National Forest's annual revenue through fees collected from commercial outfitter and guide operations, visitor centers, and other recreation facilities. This return on investment could be maximized rather than undermined by enhanced appropriated support for the Tongass recreation program.

Instead an overall downward trend of investment in the past 5 years is eroding the Tongass recreation program and infrastructure. Last year, the Forest Service's Alaska Region reported that with current levels of appropriated funding they will not be able to sustain delivery of the Tongass' recreation program or maintain the recreation and trail infrastructure currently in place.

More than a million visitors will travel to southeast Alaska this year drawn by our region's unique communities, scenic beauty, rich natural resources, and the diverse opportunities for sight-seeing, recreation, hunting and fishing, and adventure. The world-class services and experiences we provide to this influx of visitors is an economic engine directly linked to the Forest Service's effective and sustainable management of its recreation programs and resources. Nearly 80 percent of the land in southeast Alaska is within the Tongass. The Tongass contains top tourist destinations such as Mendenhall Glacier Recreation Area, Misty Fiords National Monument, and Tracy Arm/Fords Terror Wilderness Area; wildlife and bear viewing sites including Anan Creek, Polk Inlet, Pack Creek, and Margaret Creek; thousands of miles of freshwater streams and millions of acres of backcountry landscapes available for fishing, hunting, and nature-based tourism; and a vast network of community-based and remote hiking trails, cabins and campgrounds.

Just as we must depend upon the Tongass, the region's economy depends upon the tourism and recreation industry. Tom Tidwell, Chief of the U.S. Forest Service, has testified that nationwide recreation "provides more economic activity and supports more jobs than all other activities on our national forests put together." This holds true in southeast Alaska where the tourism industry makes significant economic contributions including 10,800 jobs, \$1.09 billion annually in visitor spending, and \$405 million in annual labor income. According to the Alaska State Department of Labor's forecast of economic trends, the tourism industry will continue to grow in 2015.

We represent the communities, businesses, families, and individuals behind the statistics and budget numbers. Thank you for your consideration and action on this important issue.

Sincerely,

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