
May 17, 2016

Dear Ms. Bustam, Mr. Moyer and Mr. Burk,

We were pleased to learn about the Forest Service's intent to modernize the special uses program, set leadership expectations for enhanced management of special uses, and insure support for coordinating with Washington Office staffs to advance these changes. We would like to express our support for this effort.

The special uses program plays an important role supporting tourism jobs in the economy of Southeast Alaska and the communities in the Tongass National Forest. Tourism is one of the major economic drivers in our remote region, and access to the Tongass is an essential component of the experiences provided by the growing tourism sector. Since 1990, visitation to Southeast Alaska has quadrupled from 235,000 visitors in 1990 to over 1,000,000 visitors in the summer of 2014 with expectations for that number to continue to rise. According to State of Alaska's Department of Commerce, statewide the tourism industry plays the most important role in the southeast region, where it accounts for 20 percent of the region's employment (10,800 jobs), contributes \$1.09 billion annually in visitor spending, and \$405 million in total annual labor income. Improving the special use permit process could help ensure that tourism businesses have opportunity to grow by helping them access the public land that surrounds our communities.

We look forward to getting more clarity about how the agency intends to begin this long overdue process. Clarifying the "six-sigma process" will help grow buy-in amongst stakeholders. Additionally, we hope that you will consider taking a closer look at the unique and universal issues at play here in Southeast Alaska. As the nation's largest National Forest with a vibrant tourism industry and communities surrounded by National Forest lands, we are unique in reliance on access to the Tongass.

The Juneau Economic Development Council has convened the Visitor Product Cluster Working Group since 2011 in order to bring the members of the region's recreation and tourism industry operators and guides together with federal, state and local agencies, university faculty, trade associations, community leaders and other stakeholders committed to addressing industry needs, concerns and opportunities on a cooperative basis. The cluster process was implemented, in part, to help achieve the Secretary's vision of the Tongass transition that would support diverse economies, recognizing that new jobs are most often created within existing robust economic sectors. From independent family-run businesses to the cruise ships that ply the Inside Passage, we have a shared interest in making sure our businesses have the opportunity to grow.

We are supportive of efforts to modernize the special uses program to encourage reasonable access and smart management of the amazing resources of the Tongass National Forest. Today, many businesses feel that the lack of resources assigned to the special uses program as well as the antiquated system is an impediment to doing business on the Tongass. Funding and attention to recreation programs continues to be a need in the Tongass.

Several Visitor Products group participants wrote a letter to Undersecretary Robert Bonnie in 2014 highlighting some of the issues with the permitting process facing businesses that access the remote parts of the forest. These businesses included representatives of the small and medium size cruise ships, float plane operators, hunting and fishing guides and day boats. Our group is currently developing suggestions and fixes and collaborating with Forest Service staff to improve the permitting process for remote users of the Tongass.

We hope that the agency will continue to work collaboratively or in partnership with our group and other permit holders to incorporate our experience and the progress we have made. Again, we are in support of your efforts.

Sincerely,

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