

Sportsmen, wildlife groups urge committee to reject Murkowski's Tongass bill

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Published: Wednesday, April 24, 2013

A coalition of nearly 20 sportsmen and wildlife groups urged leaders of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee to reject a bill that would allow a Native Alaskan corporation to acquire roughly 70,000 acres of the Tongass National Forest.

In a letter spearheaded by Safari Club International, the Wildlife Society, the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership and Wildlife Forever, the groups warned that Sen. Lisa Murkowski's (R-Alaska) [S. 340](#) would set a dangerous precedent by allowing Sealaska Corp. to select lands from outside the areas it was entitled to under a 1970s land settlement, opening a potential "Pandora's box" for other Native Alaskan claims.

Murkowski's bill, which will be discussed by the committee tomorrow, would also give the Juneau-based corporation logging access to a disproportionate amount of the Tongass' largest trees, which provide crucial habitat for deer and bears, the groups said.

"While the amount of acreage requested in S. 340 appears small relative to the overall size of the Tongass National Forest, the public lands that Sealaska seeks to obtain for timber harvest include some of the region's richest and most biologically productive sites," the groups wrote.

They also warned that federal agencies haven't yet reviewed the potential impacts of the bill on species including the Queen Charlotte goshawk, the Alexander Archipelago wolf and the Prince of Wales flying squirrel, which groups have petitioned for listing under the Endangered Species Act.

Jim Peña, the associate deputy chief of the National Forest System, is scheduled to testify at tomorrow's hearing and would presumably address these issues (*E&E Daily*, April 22).

If the bill does advance, the sportsmen groups requested that roughly 15,000

acres at North Kuiu Island and Keete Inlet be removed, buffers for salmon streams be required, and public access language be strengthened.

As it has in previous years, Murkowski's Sealaska bill has drawn fire from local residents, environmental groups, tourism officials and sportsmen groups, though some longtime foes have acknowledged significant improvements in the bill.

Murkowski has said the latest language features redrawn boundaries to protect old-growth habitat, conserve second-growth timber, and protect fisheries and anchorages for fishermen. In addition, 26,000 acres on northern Prince of Wales Island has been dropped out of concerns for residents in Point Baker, Port Protection and Edna Bay, she said.

The new bill would also significantly reduce the number of "futures sites" that would allow Sealaska to promote hydropower and tourism development in the forest, and the number and acreage of cultural sites in the bill have also been slashed, she said.

Sealaska officials have argued that the bill would allow it to avoid logging in sensitive roadless areas and municipal watersheds in its current selection "boxes." The bill would designate roadless protections on 152,000 acres of high-value watersheds and karst-rich timber areas.

"The selections represent less than 1 percent impact to large tree-old growth areas," said Rick Harris, executive vice president of Sealaska. "After Sealaska's selection, 76 percent of the original Tongass National Forest large tree forestlands remain intact and in a status of permanent preservation."

Ron Wolfe, Sealaska's natural resources manager, said hunters and other forest users often seek Sealaska's harvested lands for the "abundance of wildlife for viewing and hunting."

Murkowski has said her Sealaska proposal is her highest-priority public lands bill this Congress. As such, its advancement from the committee could grease the political skids for the Senate to pass broader public lands packages that could include new wilderness and parks.

At least one local environmental group has said it now supports the bill, and some national groups have indicated they may not oppose the measure if it is

amended to protect the Forest Service's transition to second-growth logging and is paired with other conservation measures.