

Phil Taylor, E&E reporter
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Nine communities in southeast Alaska said they oppose a bill by Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska) to allow an Alaska Native-owned corporation to acquire some 70,000 acres of the Tongass National Forest, arguing the bill could threaten their livelihoods.

The communities, most of which are located on Prince of Wales Island, said the Sealaska Corp. should acquire lands only from within the "boxes" to which it was entitled under a 1971 land settlement, rather than select from other federal lands "around our villages," as Murkowski's bill would allow.

Calling Murkowski's S. 340 "unfair and morally repugnant," they warned it would "create a new injustice against us." Instead, the communities asked that Sealaska stick to the final land selections it submitted to the Bureau of Land Management in 2008, calling it "a simple solution which is just and consistent with legal and moral precedent."

"S. 340 is divisive, because the people in our towns have made substantial investments in our homes and businesses in the 37 years since Sealaska had agreed to take their timber land around their own villages," the letter states. "S. 340 threatens all of the investments and businesses people in our towns have made, on the sole ground that Sealaska wants better timberland and new forms of inholdings not authorized in [law]."

The communities include Thorne Bay, Cape Pole, Hollis, Naukati, Whale Pass, Kupreanof, Port Protection, Edna Bay and Point Baker.

In a letter to Senate Energy and Natural Resources Chairman Ron Wyden (D-Ore.), the communities asked to be allowed to testify if the panel holds a hearing on the bill. The same nine communities opposed Murkowski's Sealaska bill at a hearing before the committee in May 2011.

Murkowski's measure would allow Juneau-based Sealaska to select lands from outside the original boxes to which it was entitled under the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (E&E Daily, Feb. 15). In the past, the proposal has bitterly divided residents, Alaska Natives, sportsmen and environmentalists in southeast Alaska, though most stakeholders have withheld judgment on the new bill.

Murkowski's office didn't comment on the towns' letter but said the senator has taken "unprecedented" steps to address the concerns of

all stakeholders and remains committed to completing Sealaska's land entitlement in a way that sustains what's left of the timber industry in southeast Alaska.

The senator's new bill appears to have alleviated some of the concerns of conservation groups, the Obama administration and Democrats over its impacts to old-growth trees and the Forest Service's ability to transition the 17-million-acre Tongass to second-growth harvests.

The service said it hopes the committee will add language to the bill that would allow it to harvest some second-growth trees sooner (Greenwire, Feb. 21). Some environmental groups said they would defer to the agency on whether to support the bill.

But Eric Myers, policy director for Audubon Alaska, has also said Sealaska should stick to the lands it asked BLM to convey in 2008, instead of pursuing a legislative alternative.

A bipartisan agreement on Sealaska could build important momentum toward passage of public lands packages that eluded the Senate in the 112th Congress.

As the Energy Committee's top Republican, Murkowski could influence the Senate's ability to move bipartisan packages to designate new wilderness, parks or conservation areas.

Murkowski's revised bill also contains changes to address the Forest Service's earlier concerns over creating new private inholdings. For example, the bill's "futures sites," which Sealaska could use for hydroelectric projects, tourism development and other uses, have been greatly reduced in number and are generally located within the original claims settlement act selection boxes. The acreage for sacred sites has also been reduced.