

America's Rainforest at Risk

REPORT SUMMARY

High-grading on the Tongass National Forest: Implications of Pending Land Selections on Forest Diversity

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Coastal temperate rainforests of the world occur in only ten areas, are extremely rare, and account for less than 3% of all forest cover on earth. Alaska's Tongass National Forest contains a large portion of the world's last remaining old-growth rainforest. Regarded widely as the "crown jewel" of the national forest system, the Tongass is home to the bulk of America's remaining old-growth forest.

Over the last century, the Alaska timber industry has focused logging on the largest and most valuable old-growth trees of the Tongass. This controversial practice is referred to as "high-grading"¹ and has already



eliminated half or more of the very large-tree stands on the Tongass. The very biggest trees, the ancient giants greater than 10 feet in diameter that can grow for many centuries, have largely been cut and eliminated from the forest.

Today, the remaining stands of very large-tree old growth are extremely rare and account for only 0.5 percent (82,000 acres) of the 16.8 million-acre Tongass. Known as volume class 7, these remnant

¹ High-grading is defined as the disproportionate cutting, relative to occurrence, of the highest-volume stands on the Tongass. This practice dates back many decades when the biggest trees on the Tongass were systematically targeted for logging.

stands² are not only visually impressive but also provide important habitat for five species of Pacific salmon, Steelhead, brown bear, black bear, wolves, Sitka black-tailed deer, river otter, marten, flying squirrel, Bald Eagle, Marbled Murrelet, Northern Goshawk and other wildlife.

Congress has long-recognized the problem of high-grading and took specific action to eliminate this practice of logging “a disproportionate amount of old growth timber” on the Tongass as part of the Tongass Timber Reform Act enacted in 1990.³ Some twenty years later, however, the Sealaska Corporation is seeking legislation (S 730/HR 1408) that threatens a return to high-grading of the largest and most profitable trees. If enacted, the legislation would eliminate a substantial portion of the last remaining very large-tree old growth forest on the Tongass.

S 730/HR 1408 would re-open the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) of 1971 to give the Sealaska Corporation the unprecedented ability to select and obtain highly valuable public lands in the Tongass containing extremely disproportionate quantities of very large-tree old-growth timber.⁴ The legislation would permit a 12-fold increase in the Sealaska Corporation’s logging of very large-tree old growth. The legislation would also authorize Sealaska Corporation to obtain some the most popular public lands in the Tongass in hundreds of smaller parcels scattered throughout the forest that are currently open to the public for fishing, hunting, and recreation.

Signed into law in 1971, ANCSA is the largest land claims settlement in U.S. history, and was enacted with strong bi-partisan support to resolve all aboriginal land claims in Alaska. Under existing ANCSA law, Sealaska Corporation has already made its final land selections within the Tongass. S 730/HR 1408 would give Sealaska Corporation approximately 65,000

² Old growth forest is categorized into classes. Very large-tree old-growth forest (class 7), is the rarest and most valuable forest type, including high-volume stands that have 50,000 board feet or more per acre. Class 7 is a very small subset of all old growth.

³ H.R. 987: Tongass Timber Reform Act, Section 301(c)(2). See Government Accounting Office, Contractual Modification Requirements of the Tongass Timber Reform Act, Report to Congressional Committees, Appendix II (March 1991).

⁴ S. 730 was introduced by Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) April 5, 2011. H.R. 1404 was introduced by Representative Don Young (R-AK) April 6, 2011.

acres in new public lands for logging and development outside of areas where the corporation's existing selections have been made.⁵

To evaluate the impact S 730/HR 1408, Audubon Alaska mapped each of the proposed new timber selections using a US Forest Service forest cover database.

Key report findings include:

- Following decades of controversial logging involving “high grading” (i.e., logging that targets the largest and most valuable old-growth trees) the remaining stands of very large-tree old-growth (class 7) are extremely rare. These stands account for only 0.5 percent or ~ 82,000 acres of the 16.8 million-acre Tongass National Forest.
- S. 730/HR 1408 would enable Sealaska Corporation to clearcut vastly greater amounts of highly valuable very large-tree old growth than under current law. Public lands that would be transferred to Sealaska Corporation contain up to 12 times more acres of very large-tree old growth than occurs on the lands the corporation has already selected under current ANCSA law.
- The public lands that would be obtained by Sealaska Corporation include a significant portion of the last remaining very large-tree old growth in the Tongass. These highest-volume large-tree stands account for only 1.6 percent of productive old growth on the Tongass as a whole but make up 24-27 percent of the lands Sealaska Corporation seeks under S 730/HR1408.
- Under S 730/HR 1408 Sealaska Corporation could clearcut up to 17 percent of the last remaining very large-tree old growth (class 7) on the Tongass.
- Public lands that Sealaska Corporation would obtain under S 730/HR 1408 are far more valuable than the corporation's existing land selections and include approximately \$50 million worth of

⁵ Sealaska Corporation has submitted its final land selections to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the federal agency responsible for land conveyances, but has directed the BLM to halt transfer of those lands as it seeks legislation from Congress that would enable the corporation to obtain more valuable public lands.

taxpayer-funded infrastructure and other investments (e.g., roads, trails, bridges, transfer sites, fish habitat restoration projects).

S 730/HR 1408 would result in the permanent loss of a substantial portion of the remaining very large-tree old growth on the Tongass National Forest. This loss would be additive to the logging of any other large-tree old growth resulting from U.S. Forest Service timber sales, with long-term impacts on forest diversity and associated wildlife habitat.



Photo credits: Jack Gustafsen (Page 1) and John Schoen (Page 3)

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