

THE LEADER IN ENERGY & ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY NEWS**9. FORESTS:****Trout Unlimited distances itself from Murkowski's Tongass bill**

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A conservation group this weekend said it does not support a plan by Alaska's delegation to allow an Alaska Native-owned corporation to acquire roughly 70,000 acres of the Tongass National Forest for logging, energy and tourism development.

Trout Unlimited said it also does not propose the inclusion of 94,000 acres of conservation lands in Sen. Lisa Murkowski's [S. 340](#), as suggested in a [press release](#) last week by Sealaska Corp., which would receive the lands in the bill to complete a decades-old land entitlement ([E&E Daily](#), Feb. 15).

Murkowski's bill would allow Juneau-based Sealaska to select lands from outside the original "boxes" it was entitled to select from under the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA). That bill created Sealaska and 11 other regional tribal corporations, offered them nearly \$1 billion and allowed them to select up to 44 million acres of land.

Murkowski said the new bill, which is co-sponsored by Sen. Mark Begich (D-Alaska), pares back acreage and makes other concessions to satisfy concerns of the Forest Service, fishermen, tour guides and environmental groups.

But Trout Unlimited said the bill fails to protect scores of high-value salmon and trout watersheds that support fishing jobs that employ one in 10 in southeast Alaska.

Although it supports the completion of Sealaska's land claims under ANCSA, the 152,000 acres of conservation set-asides is not enough to earn its support, Trout Unlimited said.

"The inference by Sealaska that they have bought our support of this legislation with a tiny amount of conservation lands is false," said Tim Bristol, manager of Trout Unlimited's Alaska Program. "It appears as though their executives are trying to pull the wool over the public's eyes by implying they have buy-in from Trout Unlimited."

A Sealaska spokeswoman was unavailable this morning.

Robert Dillon, a spokesman for Murkowski, this morning said the senator's office met several times with Trout Unlimited and other environmental groups to refine the bill.

"We bent over backwards to meet every reasonable request from all stakeholders," he said. "[Trout Unlimited] did come in with requests, and they were at the table during these negotiations."

Although environmental groups are still reviewing the bill, some argued that Sealaska should not be allowed to revise a settlement it agreed to more than four decades ago. Sealaska, which includes 20,000 shareholders and is Alaska's largest Native-owned corporation, in 2008 identified the lands it wanted conveyed under the 1971 settlement but asked the Bureau of Land Management to halt the transaction while it pursued a legislative alternative.

"Sealaska got what it asked for," said Eric Myers, policy director for Audubon Alaska. "Now they want a 'do-over' because they think they have the votes to reopen ANCSA in an unprecedented way and rewrite settlement terms that they previously advocated to obtain vastly more valuable public lands."

But other environmentalists said the bill on first blush appears to be an improvement from past versions.

"Sen. Murkowski has shown some solid leadership and tried to address some thorny issues that were raised by southeast Alaskans," Buck Lindekugel, an attorney for the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council, told an Alaska radio station last week. "There is a lot of bittersweet stuff here, particularly with some of the timberlands. Nobody's going to be happy with all of them. But both Sealaska and Sen. Murkowski helped avoid some real controversial places."

The Southeast Alaska Conservation Council said it is continuing to review the bill and will announce an updated position soon.

Concerns about old growth

Murkowski's bill was opposed last year by the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council, Trout Unlimited, the Alaska Wilderness League, Defenders of Wildlife, Earthjustice, the National Audubon Society, the Sierra Club, the Sitka Conservation Society and the Wilderness Society, among others. It also drew opposition from Alaska's affiliate of the National Rifle Association, local tour boat operators and some local communities.

Critics warned the bill would harm old-growth trees, stall the Forest Service's transition to second-growth timber, and threaten at-risk birds and wolves that depend on old-growth habitat. Some local stakeholders said the "futures" sites Sealaska could select under the bill would limit access for tourism and recreation.

But Alaska lawmakers have long argued that Sealaska got a raw deal in the 1971 settlement because much of the valuable real estate was under contract to pulp mills. In addition, nearly half of the allotted areas it received are underwater, and much of the rest is in village watersheds or inventoried roadless areas.

"The current selections areas do not allow Sealaska to meet its congressionally defined obligation under ANCSA to advance the social cultural and economic well-being of our shareholders, and by doing that we also advance the jobs and economic sustainability in rural southeast Alaska communities," Rick Harris, Sealaska's executive vice president, told [Greenwire](#) last summer.

The corporation last Congress warned lawmakers that without a legislative solution, it would soon run out of timber supply on its existing landholdings and would be forced to select and log inventoried roadless areas ([E&ENews PM](#), May 26, 2011).

Murkowski's bill could be a linchpin in the Senate's attempt to pass public lands packages that include wilderness and conservation bills in the 113th Congress. Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee staff will be looking for ways to pair Republican and Democratic measures to garner bipartisan support.

Murkowski earlier this month told *Greenwire* the Sealaska proposal would be her highest-priority lands bill this Congress. She expressed optimism that the Obama administration would sign off on the measure ([E&E Daily](#), Feb. 13).

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