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October 29, 2019

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Southeast Alaska Tribal Governments Call for Protection of Tongass National Forest
Tribal Leaders United in Opposition to Proposed Full Exemption in the Alaska Roadless Rulemaking Consultation process

KAKE, ALASKA – In an unprecedented show of unity, six federally recognized Tribal governments stepped forward to voice their concern over the federal government’s handling of the proposed Alaska Roadless Rulemaking process and its potential negative impact on tribally significant lands in the Tongass National Forest. The proposed removal of protections for 9.5 million acres of some of the world’s last remaining old growth forest threatens the food security of Southeast Alaska Tribal citizens and imperils efforts to grow tourism and sustain commercial fisheries.

In a joint letter to U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue, the Angoon Cooperative Association, Central Council of Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, Hoonah Indian Association, Hydaburg Cooperative Association, Organized Village of Kake, and Organized Village of Kasaan expressed deep disappointment in the year-long process that has not been designed to be fair or equitable from the beginning and has completely ignored the Tribal governments’ voices and concerns. Concern was also expressed as a rushed timeline seemed more focused on political expediency rather than settling on an equitable solution that addressed Tribal concerns.

“It’s absolutely critical that we be at the table instead of on the menu” stated Richard Peterson, President of the Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska (CCTHITA). Throughout the process Tribal leaders have felt their roles and responsibilities as “cooperating agencies” have been undermined by a politically motivated, expedited timeline to be finished by June 2020, even though all of the Tribal representatives repeatedly requested extensions in writing, at meetings, and during teleconferences with the United States Forest Service.

“Most Tongass residents support keeping Roadless protections in place,” President of the Organized Village of Kake, Joel Jackson said. “We have told Senator Murkowski this, and we have testified to the Forest Service, but timber lobbyists asking for taxpayer subsidies to cut down millions of our trees appear to be more convincing.”

The Tribes agreed to participate in this process as “cooperating agencies” in order to have meaningful engagement with, and provide our unique knowledge and expertise to, the US Forest Service regarding

the Alaska Roadless rulemaking process. Coming to the table as partners in this process, the Tribal leaders have worked to provide comments and input on the six alternatives that were crafted by the U.S. Forest Service, who used the recommendations of a diversity of stakeholders in a Citizen Advisory Committee convened by Governor Walker as a starting point. These alternatives represented a variety of compromises between maintaining Roadless Area characteristics while allowing for local infrastructure and economic development needs.

“We spent our own time, money, and energy to invest in creating a workable compromise for the communities of Southeast Alaska to this long-standing controversial issue,” stated Joel Jackson. “We then learned that the State of Alaska was granted \$2M by the U.S. Forest Service to serve in their capacity as a cooperating agency, even though they have never been invested in finding a compromise and have advocated overwhelmingly for a full exemption from the start.” The statement was in response to the Tribe’s learning that a timber special interest group, the Alaska Forest Association, was also granted more than \$200,000 for their expertise and participation.

For many Tribal leaders, this is another indignation and example of environmental injustice as many Alaska Native communities bear the brunt of the climate change impacts and extraction policies that disrupt if not destroy the ecosystems they have come to rely upon while their concerns and voices are ignored.

“Any elected official in Alaska who supports a full exemption, is disregarding their constituents, undermining the public process, and ignoring the sovereign Tribal governments – whose people have lived and depended on these lands and waters since time immemorial,” said CCTHITA President Richard Peterson.

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