

Biden Bans Roads and Logging in Alaska's Tongass National Forest

The U.S. Forest Service rule restricts development on more than nine million acres in North America's largest temperate rainforest, reversing a Trump decision.

By [Lisa Friedman](#) | New York Times | Jan. 25, 2023



Grizzly bear mother, cubs in tow, fished in the Tongass National Forest of Alaska.

Credit...Ron Niebrugge/Alamy

WASHINGTON — The Biden administration announced Wednesday that it has banned logging and road-building on about nine million acres of the Tongass National Forest in Southeast Alaska, aiming to settle a two-decade battle over the fate of [North America's largest temperate rainforest](#).

The new rule reinstates protections in the pristine Alaskan back country that were first imposed in 2001 but [stripped away](#) by President Donald J. Trump in 2020.

Tom Vilsack, the agriculture secretary, said the effort would protect cedar, hemlock and Sitka spruce trees — many of them more than 800 years old — that provide essential habitats for 400 species of wildlife, including bald eagles, salmon and the world's greatest concentration of black bears. The towering trees also play an essential role in fighting climate change. They store more than 10 percent of the carbon accumulated by all national forests in the United States, according to the government.

In addition to prohibiting road construction — a first step toward new logging — the United States Forest Service plan also puts an end to large scale logging of old growth timber across the forest's entire 16 million acres.

“As our nation's largest national forest and the largest intact temperate rainforest in the world, the Tongass National Forest is key to conserving biodiversity and addressing the climate crisis,” Mr. Vilsack said in a statement. Restoring the road prohibitions “listens to the voices of Tribal Nations and the people of Southeast Alaska while recognizing the importance of fishing and tourism to the region's economy,” he said.

Tongass National Forest, which has been called “America's Amazon,” is also home to rare earth minerals, making it a place of intense interest to state and local leaders who say it should be mined to create jobs and bolster Alaska's economy.



Cedar, hemlock and Sitka spruce trees in the forest provide essential habitats hundreds of wildlife species.

Credit...Jaynes Gallery/DanitaDelimont, via Alamy

Senator Dan Sullivan, the Alaska Republican, called the rule “overly-burdensome,” accused the Biden administration of harming his state's economy and said he would retaliate by blocking the president's nominees.

“I’ve implored Secretary Vilsack repeatedly to work with us and to not lock up our state,” Mr. Sullivan said in a statement. “My message to hard-working Alaskans who are being crushed and utterly disregarded by this administration: I will fight this decision with everything in my power, including through my Senate oversight responsibilities and by holding relevant nominees wherever possible.”

The state’s Republican governor, Mike Dunleavy said in a statement that the final rule “is a huge loss for Alaskans” and accused the Biden administration of treating his state unfairly. “Alaskans deserve access to the resources that the Tongass provides — jobs, renewable energy resources and tourism, not a government plan that treats human beings within a working forest like an invasive species,” he wrote.

Jim Clark, an attorney in Juneau who has been working with industry and state officials to keep Tongass exempt from the protections that apply to much of the National Forest system, has argued to the Biden administration that the economic benefits of some road construction are critical and can be achieved without harming the ecology. He noted that the national forest is about the size of West Virginia, and can accommodate what he described as limited infrastructure.

In 2008 the United States Geological Survey found 148 mineral deposits in the region. State leaders have argued that an updated survey should be completed before any new restrictions are imposed so the government and the public is aware of the full economic potential that could be lost.

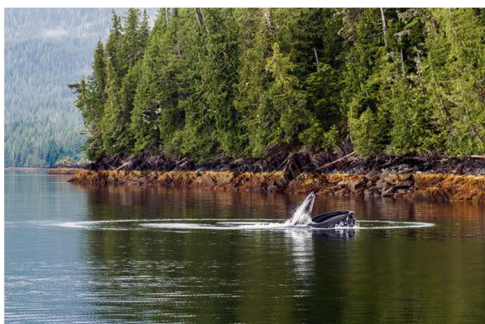
The number of jobs linked to the timber industry in Southeast Alaska near the Tongass National Forest has declined from 3,543 in 1991 to [312 in 2022](#) — the lowest timber employment level ever recorded — according to the Southeast Conference, the regional economic development organization.

Timber executives said years of restrictions imposed by Democrats have run lumber companies out of the region.

Tessa Axelson, executive director of the Alaska Forest Association, which represents timber companies in Southeast Alaska said the industry is “disappointed but not surprised” by the rule. “Our local economies cannot survive without the investments of small businesses like those in the forest products industry. This announcement further threatens an already precarious environment for our operators,” she said.

Democrats and Republicans have fought over the Tongass for decades, with environmentalists, some Native tribes and Democrats fighting to preserve the forest while Republicans, timber companies and mining executives argued for its development.

The decision is the latest in a series of Biden administration moves reversing actions by Mr. Trump designed to ease the way for fossil fuel development and mineral extraction on public lands. Last month, the Biden administration [extended protections to rivers](#), marshes and waterways that the Trump administration tried to repeal. The White House also issued new directives for assessing greenhouse gas emissions in federal environmental reviews, replacing guidelines that had been withdrawn by Mr. Trump.



A humpback whale near the boundary of the Tongass National Forest.

Credit...Alamy

Conservationists and several Alaskan native groups applauded the Tongass decision. They have argued that allowing road construction could devastate the vast wilderness of snowy peaks, rushing rivers and virgin old-growth forest.

“This is great news for the forest, the salmon, the wildlife, and the people who depend on intact ecosystems to support their ways of life and livelihoods,” Kate Glover, an attorney for Earthjustice, an environmental group, said in a statement.

Forest Service officials said the agency received about 112,000 comments from tribes, rural communities and others affected by the rule and found that the majority wanted to ban roads in the forest.

While Tongass National Forest represents about 9 percent of the entire lands in the national forest system, it has about 16 percent of forest areas that are roadless. Most of those are old-growth forests.

Dominick DellaSala, a conservation biologist who has studied Tongass, called it “remarkable” and noted that most of the nation’s old growth trees in the lower 48 states were logged decades ago.

Tongass, he said, is “a place where eagles are as abundant as house sparrows, salmon clog streams like rush-hour traffic and wolves feed on salmon carcasses.” All of the species, he said, “do best in unlogged forests.”

The new plan also includes \$25 million in federal spending on local sustainable development in Alaska, for projects to improve the health of the forest.

The Biden Administration’s Environmental Agenda

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- **Limits on Soot:** The Biden administration [proposed to tighten limits](#) on a deadly air pollutant also known as soot responsible for thousands of premature deaths every year.
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