

# **NEWS RELEASE**

## **USDA Forest Service**

### **Alaska Region**

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**Contact:** Ray Massey  
**E-mail:** rmassey@fs.fed.us  
**Phone:** (907) 586-7876  
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**Public Affairs**  
**P.O. Box 21628**  
**Juneau, AK 99802**

### **Roadless Protection Finalized for Tongass**

**JUNEAU, Alaska-** The U.S. Department of Agriculture announced today that it would not apply the roadless rule to the Tongass National Forest, completing the settlement of a court challenge to the roadless rule brought by the State of Alaska. This decision maintains the balance for roadless area protection struck in the Tongass Land Management Plan, providing opportunities for sustainable economic development in Southeast Alaska while ensuring that the vast majority of the Tongass remains off limits to development.

About 15.4 million acres of the 16.8 million-acre Tongass are currently roadless and undeveloped. The Tongass Land Management Plan allows consideration of active management, over the long term, on about 300,000 acres of inventoried roadless areas. Development of the forest plan involved an unprecedented level of scientific review and public involvement, culminating in a 1997 Record of Decision. The 2001 National Roadless Rule altered the balance struck in the forest plan, and was challenged by the State of Alaska as well as by 6 other states. As a result of a separate challenge brought by the State of Wyoming, the roadless rule has been enjoined nationwide.

People in 32 communities within the Tongass National Forest depend on the forest for subsistence and social and economic health. Most communities lack road and utility connections to other communities. The environmental impact statement for the national roadless rule acknowledged that Southeast Alaska would be particularly affected by its provisions, estimating that a total of 900 jobs could be lost due to the roadless rule. The state's legal challenge threatened to overturn other administrative land-use reservations already in effect under the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980.

This announcement concludes a process begun on July 15, with release of the proposed exemption for public comment, following settlement of the State of Alaska's lawsuit challenging the application of the roadless rule in Alaska. Publication of the final rule in the Federal Register is expected near the end of the year.

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**News Editor Note: For Tongass-specific facts contact Tongass Public Affairs Officer Dennis Neill at (907) 228-6201 or cell (907) 723-7099. National policy contact Bill Bradshaw (202) 720-6767**