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Biden bans logging roads in much of America’s largest national forest

White House reinstates protections in Tongass National Forest that were undone by Trump; move aims to protect fish and a giant carbon sink

By [Timothy Puko](#)

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The Biden administration on Wednesday restored protections for more than half of Alaska’s [Tongass National Forest](#), safeguarding one of the world’s largest intact temperate rainforests from new roads and logging.

The Tongass is a relatively pristine expanse in the state’s southeast that has been the focus of a long fight between environmentalists and Alaskan timber interests. State leaders [had persuaded the Trump administration in 2020](#) to open it up to new roads and logging, undoing protections dating to the Clinton era, in a bid to boost economic development.

Biden administration officials said Wednesday that the forest is vital both for wildlife habitat — especially fish — and fighting climate change. The administration’s decision, through the U.S. Department of Agriculture, will repeal the 2020 Alaska Roadless Rule, making it illegal again for logging companies to build roads and cut and remove timber throughout more than 9.3 million acres of forest.

“The Tongass National Forest is key to conserving biodiversity and addressing the climate crisis,” Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said in a statement. “Restoring roadless protections 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.”

The rule is scheduled for publication in the Federal Register on Friday and goes into effect immediately, a department spokesman said.

The forest is known for plentiful salmon runs, imposing fjords and ancient trees, which are critical for trapping and storing carbon dioxide to mitigate climate change, the department said. Tongass trees absorb at least 8 percent of all the carbon stored in the entire Lower 48’s forests.

Alaska’s governor and Republicans in its congressional delegation have previously criticized the proposal, [first announced in November 2021](#). They have said it would hurt the timber industry.

“This ruling is a huge loss for Alaskans,” Gov. Mike Dunleavy said Wednesday in a tweet. “Alaskans deserve access to the resources that the Tongass provides — jobs, renewable energy resources and



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tourism, not a government plan that treats human beings within a working forest like an invasive species.”

[This tree has stood here for 500 years. Will it be sold for \\$17,500?](#)

But advocates for more protection and the Biden administration emphasized that the forest plays a huge role supporting Alaska’s fishing industry, a much larger employer in the state than the timber industry. Scientists have identified the Tongass as an ecological oasis providing key habitat for wild Pacific salmon and trout.

Restoring protections was popular with Alaska Native leaders, environmentalists and tour operators, who said that preserving the region’s remaining wild landscapes will sustain the state’s economy in the long term. The Forest Service received about 112,000 comment documents, most in favor of restoring roadless protections, the Agriculture Department said Wednesday.

Tongass habitat is also crucial for Sitka black-tailed deer, among many other species. It boasts the highest density of brown bears in North America, and some of its trees are between 300 and 1,000 years old, and [as tall as 17-story buildings](#).

“The Tongass Roadless Rule is important to everyone,” said Joel Jackson, president of the Organized Village of Kake, which sits on the forest edge on an island south of the capital, Juneau.

“The old-growth timber is a carbon sink, one of the best in the world,” Jackson said in a statement. “It’s important to OUR WAY OF LIFE — the streams, salmon, deer, and all the forest animals and plants.”

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2023/01/25/tongass-forest-protections-alaska-biden/>

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