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Alaskans brace for road ban

Governor Knowles calls roadless policy an outrage, double-cross

President Bill Clinton’s sweeping initiative to potentially close some 40 million acres of wild lands in national forests from road building, logging, mining and other development would drive the final nail in the coffin for Southeast Alaska’s timber industry if the plan is applied to the Tongass National Forest. The White House will make a final determination on whether to include Tongass roadless areas in a permanent moratorium on road building after public hearings are conducted across the U.S. over the next 12 months.

The Tongass contains more roadless areas than any other national forest, some 9.4 million of the forest’s 17 million acres. Of the Tongass’ 5.6 million acre commercial timber base, 576,000 acres are available to logging under the recently-revised Tongass Land Management Plan (TLMP). If the new roadless policy is applied, some 403,000 acres of the timber base reserved for cutting would be put off-limits, leaving only 183,000 acres for harvesting on a rotation cycle of up to 200 years.

The new policy would strike a fatal blow to what remains of the region’s timber industry. With the closures, the Alaska Forest Association warns that the forest would be capable of yielding less than 50 million board feet of timber each year. A single moderate-size mill would require at least that much to operate.

If logging were reduced to that point, (Continued to page 4)
The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has formally proposed a “depleted” listing under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) for Beluga whales in Cook Inlet. The proposal will allow the federal government to regulate subsistence hunting of Beluga whales and regulate other activities occurring in and around Cook Inlet.

NMFS had said earlier this fall that it would seek a depleted listing, but the proposal is now official following its publication in the Federal Register last month. The public will have an opportunity to comment on the proposed designation until December 20.

Resource Review is the official periodic publication of the Regional Development Council (RDC), Alaska’s largest privately funded nonprofit economic development organization working to develop Alaska’s natural resources in an orderly manner and to create a broad-based, diversified economy while protecting and enhancing the environment.

Executive Committee Officers

Population Director: Jim Breen (907) 269-4960

Vice President, Finance/Member: Beth I. Thomas (907) 269-4960

Secretary: Anthony Brough (907) 269-4960

Treasurer: Robert C. Pettman (907) 269-4960

Staff

Executive Director: Ken Freeman (907) 269-4960

Director: Carl Pettman (907) 269-4960

Finance/Member: Beth I. Thomas (907) 269-4960

Secretary: Anthony Brough (907) 269-4960

Treasurer: Robert C. Pettman (907) 269-4960

RDC’s web site address: www.alrde.org

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Message from the Executive Director by Ken Freeman

State ESA listing on Belugas unnecessary

The depleted designation would actually be an interim measure until the federal government makes a final determination next spring on whether to list the Beluga whales as "endangered" under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). There have been several petitioned NMFS to list the Belugas as Endangered.

On a new front, the environmental community recently petitioned to list the Beluga whale under the State of Alaska Endangered Species Act. We believe it is premature for the State to list the Beluga whale before a final decision is made by NMFS on the federal MMPA or ESA listing. The federal decision will be partly based on the results of last summer’s population surveys which have not yet been released.

Another significant fact is that it appears a state listing would not allow the subsistence use of the Beluga whale. This one factor by itself makes a state listing unreasonable and extremely punitive on Native hunters.

Given the moratorium in place on the harvest of Beluga whales until October 1, 2000, the current threat to the Beluga is alleviated which further lessens the need for a state designation.

First and foremost, the goal of RDC is to see the Cook Inlet Beluga whale population recover. Nevertheless, we are greatly concerned that although community and resource development activities in Cook Inlet have not played a part in the decline of the Belugas, they could be adversely impacted by a federal or state listing.

RDC’s annual conference will feature a special keynote luncheon on the Beluga whale and Stellar sea lion issue on Friday, November 19.

Editor’s Note: NMFS has scheduled a public hearing on the proposed federal listing on Monday, November 22 from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. in Room 154 of the Federal Office Building in Anchorage. Written comments should be sent to Chief, Marine Mammal Division, Office of Protected Resources, NMFS, 1335 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, MD 20910. Deadline is 12/30/99.

Guest Opinion

by Frank Baker

Merger will bring new Alaska success stories

I’ve lived in Alaska more than 50 years, and I’d like to share some observations about the oil industry and the pending BP Amoco-ARCO merger. I’ll say up front that I have worked for the Russian industry for 25 years. Some will assert that I am biased, and that I can’t talk about the oil industry objectively. I have benefited directly from employment in the industry, but I know many others outside the industry who have also benefited.

I remember clearly Alaska’s pre-oil days. Growing up in Seward in the 1940s and 1950s, many people lived in small houses no larger than 800 square feet. We had gravel streets, a party-line telephone system and sporadic, unreliable grocery shipments from Seattle. In those days there weren’t many houses heated well enough to stay warm in temperatures below zero. There was one radio station and a weekly newspaper. People didn’t go on vacations. They didn’t have expensive toys like snow machines, four-wheelers, or TVs (and come to think of it, no TVs at all) It was mainly fishermen who owned boats, and many people didn’t even own automobiles.

Many people back then were seasonally employed—mostly in the construction and fishing industries. Year-round jobs—if they weren’t local, territorial or federal governments—were at a premium.

People have asked me to describe how Alaska has changed. There are always tradeoffs that come with growth and development; there are far outweighed the downsides, such as:

- Thousands of year-round, private sector jobs;
- Improved schools, education infrastructure throughout the state;
- Improved roads/transportation infrastructure;
- Access to home purchases through AHFC;
- AIDEA - Alaska Industrial Development & Export Authority- small and medium-sized businesses;
- Alaska Technology and Science Foundation - grants for science and high-tech development;
- Permanent Fund growth to $25 billion, dividend program;
- Continued support of community civic, social service organizations;
- Project ’80s, state-funded capital improvements to Anchorage which significantly improved quality of life; such as Civic and Convention Center, Sports Arena, Library and Performing Arts Center
- The proposed BP Amoco-ARCO combination reminds me of 1974, when the pipeline construction camps were being built and the Prudhoe Bay haul road was under construction. There were fears about the future, but there was also a mood of excitement and expectation.

Editor’s Note: Frank Baker has worked with the oil industry since 1974.
Tongass is a sneak preview of things to come

On Oct. 1, the federal government took control of Alaska’s fisheries resources to protect the subsistence rights of rural residents. It was a big story.

Less noticed but also on Oct. 1, the feds put into effect a revision of the 1997 Tongass Land Management Plan that “includes an enormous reduction in the allowable sale quantity for timber, 10-year increase in timber harvest rotation for 270,000 acres, revisions to habitat-related standards and guidelines for wolves and bears, and new environmental objectives regarding clear-cutting.”

That’s what the Alaska Forest Association says is the effect of a revision of the Tongass Land Management Plan that Under Secretary of Agriculture James Lyons issued in April to take effect Oct. 1.

Lyons did that while environmental organizations, individuals, the timber industry and communities had appeals pending about the 1997 plan.

Forest Service never responded to the appeals so the Alaska Forest Association filed a complaint in U.S. District Court charging that in drawing up the 1997 plan the Forest Service violated the Tongass Timber Reform Act, the National Forest Management Act, the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, the Multiple-Use Sustained Yield Act, the Organic Administration Act, the Federal Advisory Committee Act and the Regulatory Flexibility Act.

Violating the law and ignoring regulations is standard operating procedure for the Forest Service.

Before there was much action in court on the suit, Lyons came out with an update of the 1997 plan at least the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council and its supporters off the Forest Service’s neck. Lyons’ 1999 update of the ‘97 plan set aside all 18 areas from logging requested by the conservation council. In fact, the leader of Lyons’ team drawing up the revisions issued a memo to be sure the team consulted with the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council and with the Hoopon Tribe.

Any timber sales contracted before Oct. 1 were not affected. After that, everything would be managed under Lyons’ 1999 plan.

What that plan does is reduce the commercially forest land by 100,000 acres — the total of the 18 areas requested by the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council — down to 579,000 acres. Of those acres, 270,000 must be harvested on a 100-year rotation. Most of that 270,000 is second growth, meaning harvesting of that timber has been put off for another 100 years.

Lyons’ action also requires more work on sales by the Forest Service so that the 180 million board feet of timber expected to be offered for sale next year will be reduced to 80 million, according to the Alaska Forest Association, a non-profit organization representing surviving Tongass timber businesses.

But even that drastic reduction by Lyons failed to make the environmentalists happy.

The Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society, the Alaska Center for the Environment and the Sitka Conservation Society filed a complaint that Lyons violated the National Environmental Policy Act. The court didn’t consider and designate more of the Tongass as wilderness.

The Southeast Alaska Conservation Council, an associate of those environmental organizations, didn’t join that complaint probably because it got its 18 areas protected. But it went after the timber allocated to Louisiana-Pacific in a settlement L-P made with the federal government in exchange for shutting its Ward Cove pulp mill.

L-P is unable to harvest by Dec. 31 all of the timber to which it received cutting rights so it was granted a one-year extension in an agreement between the White House and the Alaska congressional delegation. Sens. Ted Stevens and Frank Murkowski and Rep. Don Young promised not to go after the Forest Service’s budget in exchange for the extension. But the subsequent action by environmentalists and Lyons appears to abrogate that agreement.

Contrary to what the environmentalists claim, the industry isn’t declin ing the Tongass.

The Forest Service’s research lab in Portland issued a report on the Tongass recently. Of the 10 million acres of forested land in the Tongas, the lab says 5.6 million acres is what it terms productive old growth. The amount open to logging under Lyons’ recent plan is about one-tenth of the productive old growth. And more than one half of that one-tenth can’t be harvested for another 100 and more years.

Important to consider, too, is that since the Tongass was created as a national forest more than 90 years ago, only slightly more than 500,000 acres have been harvested — even including the years when two pulp mills and three or four major sawmills were running full tilt.

A further problem for Alaskans is that last week President Clinton asked the Forest Service to initiate an effort to protect 40 million acres of roadless areas in national forests. He recognized a management plan recently into effect for the Tongass and acknowledged that the timber industry is “in transition.” But he also said the Tongass should be studied and opinions asked on whether roadless areas of the Tongass should have greater protection.

The “this” is that the balance that must be restored. “This is the balance that was struck in ANILCA and this is the balance that must be restored.”

The bill has been the subject of extensive oversight and legislative debate during the last three Congresses, including dozens of witnesses and hundreds of hours of testimony. The issues addressed in the bill “shows the frustration Alaskans have with the dominance of the federal government and the blind eye that is often turned toward our needs,” said Murkowski.

RDC supports S. 1683 and specifically applauded Murkowski’s amendments on requiring federal managers to undergo ANILCA training and to comply with congressional intent on helicopter access in areas where they have been used historically.

“Federal managers in Alaska will benefit from training specific to ANILCA,” said RDC Executive Director Ken Freeman. “Misinterpretation of ANILCA has fostered many conflicts between the private sector and the federal government in Alaska.”

“At least intended for federal lands in Alaska to be used for a wide range of purposes, including, but not limited to, conservation and environmental protection,” Freeman added. “ANILCA must not be read as a statute designed to lock up Alaska, but as a codification of a united program to conserve some parts of Alaska while actually developing its natural resources.”

Last month Murkowski also introduced legislation that would require the federal government to grant a road easement to Chugach Native Corporation land holdings at Carbon Mountain outside Cordova.

The Resource Development Council has recently gone on record supporting proposed Beaufort Sea Lease Sale 176.

Alaska and the Gulf of Mexico are the only remaining areas where federal offshore leasing takes place. The Mineral Management Service’s (MMS) OCS Leasing Program provides companies with a structured predictable framework for acquiring prospective leases for oil and gas exploration and development.

RDC is encouraging MMS to offer the maximum acreage with limited, yet reasonable, restrictions. Areawide leasing has been successfully conducted throughout Alaska and MMS

Alaska Senator Frank Murkowski has introduced legislation that would clarify provisions of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA).

The legislation, S. 1683, would allow the Secretary of Interior to allow helicopter use in national forests under regulations where it was traditional, protect access to inholdings, the use of cabins, fishing and hunting rights, valid existing rights and require federal land managers to undergo training specific to ANILCA.

“The federal government has lost sight of the important representations to the people of Alaska on issues such as access across conservation system units and the uses in them,” Murkowski said. “This is the balance that was struck in ANILCA and this is the balance that must be restored.”

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Tongass inclusion in roadless policy would devastate timber industry

(Continued from page 1)

the region's few remaining sawmills in Wrangell, Ketchikan and Klawock would likely be forced to close. The Annette Hemlock sawmill in Metlakatla recently shut its doors because of costly environmental restrictions, a lack of timber supply and market conditions.

Ketchikan sawmill owner Steve Soley is already planning to delay a $12.2 million purchase of dry kilns he intended to make this fall. The kilns would dry green timber into wood that the moratorium because of additional costs for rehabilitation of the building in the region has lost 5,000 timber-related jobs, largely due to a series of administrative actions which have steadily diminished the land base available to logging and compromised the economics of timber sales and local facilities.

Under the new TLMP, which the Forest Service spent $13 million and more than a decade developing, less than one-tenth of the forest's commercial timber base is open to logging.

About half of that timber must be cut on a 200-year rotation cycle. Under the old plan, up to 1.7 million acres was available to logging on a 100-year cycle. Senator Frank Murkowski blasted the President's initiative, saying it has the potential to sweep the entire multi-year and multi-million dollar Tongass Land Management Plan process away with one stroke of a pen. He also charged that the policy amounted to a massive "do nothing" wilderness designation.

"If they are looking for an environmental legacy with this announcement, it will be a legacy on the cheap because they haven't done the heavy lifting to find a balance between competing views on resource management." - Senator Frank Murkowski

In the past decade, Southeast Alaska has lost more than 1,500 jobs in the forest products industry, two large pulp mills and several sawmills as the federal government has steadily reduced the land base available to logging.

Tongass inclusions in roadless policy could close off millions of acres to development. Senator Frank McGurk blasted the President's initiative, saying it has the potential to sweep the entire multi-year and multi-million dollar Tongass Land Management Plan process away with one stroke of a pen. He also charged that the policy amounted to a massive "do nothing" wilderness designation.

"If they are looking for an environmental legacy with this announcement, it will be a legacy on the cheap because they haven't done the heavy lifting to find a balance between competing views on resource management," Murkowski said.

Congressman Don Young said "the Clinton-Gore administration is reaffirming what we already knew - it is willing to take every measure possible to appease the national environmental organizations that want to end traditional multiple-use land policies for working people and communities in the West." Governor Tony Knowles pledged to take every possible step to fight a ban on new road construction in national forests if the Tongass is included.

"If the Tongass is included in a national roadless policy, I would consider this to be an outrage and a double-cross on the citizens of Alaska," Knowles said. "As Governor, I would be compelled to do everything within my power to protect the families and communities of Southeast Alaska, including taking any necessary legal actions against the federal government to prevent the Tongass from being completely repudiated by this policy."

Knowles noted that he was previously told that the Tongass would not be included in such a review because of the recent completion of the TLMP. Knowles received such assurances from his Department of Agriculture Under-secretary, pledged earlier this year that no more Tongass acreage would be closed to logging.

Southeast Alaska once had a thriving timber industry with two major pulp mills in Sitka and Ketchikan. Thousands of Alaskans were employed year-round in the industry and earned among the highest wages in the region. Since the Clinton administration came into power, the region has lost 5,000 timber-related jobs, largely due to a series of administrative actions which have steadily diminished the land base available to logging and compromised the economics of timber sales and local facilities.

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