

Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Mr. Secretary:

Re: Forest Management Job Creation and Forest Health Projects in Southeast Alaska

As the Tongass Futures Roundtable (TFR),¹ we write to urge the prompt commitment and release of funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) for silvicultural treatment of second growth stands on the Tongass National Forest. At nearly 17 million acres, The Tongass is the largest forest in the national forest system, surrounds over 30 small communities and occupies more than 90 percent of the land mass of Southeast Alaska. While the Tongass is not a fire-disturbance ecosystem, it faces forest health issues that qualify for ARRA funding.

Relevance of Forest Health

While one focus of Forest Service funding under ARRA is fire fuel management, the Act does recognize the value of forest stewardship and forest health in general. Because Southeast Alaska (and the Tongass National Forest) is a coastal rainforest and is not prone to fire management issues, the majority of ARRA funds are not available to the region. In this sense, the allocation of appropriate funding for eligible stewardship activities is even more important.

Within Southeast Alaska, the National Forest lands have over 430,000 acres of young forest stands that would benefit from active vegetative management using pre-commercial thinning, basal pruning, stand enhancement of Alaska Yellow and Western Red Cedar, and application of other young growth stewardship practices. These management activities are designed to enhance forest health and ecosystem functions.

In this regard, most of Southeast Alaska is designated as “rural” under the Title VIII of the Alaska National Interests Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA). That designation recognizes the significance of the subsistence economy for most communities in the region. The Forest Service is charged with protecting this way of life through your authority as Secretary and as such has a significant influence on their well being. Expenditures for forest health will enhance subsistence resources in the region.

¹ The Tongass Futures Roundtable brings together a diverse group of stakeholders long involved in the Tongass to discuss how to incorporate our economic, cultural, and ecological values in public policy issues throughout the region. The Roundtable seeks to explore how a broad range of stakeholders can address these public policy issues and work together to achieve a long-term balance of healthy and diverse communities, vibrant economies, responsible use of resources -including timber, while maintaining the natural values and ecological integrity of the forest.

Applicability to state and private forests

In addition to the urgent needs on federal lands in Southeast Alaska, there are also hundreds of thousands of acres of second growth stands on private and state lands in Southeast Alaska that need vegetative management. We therefore ask that you investigate prompt dedication of funding from ARRA to similar silvicultural projects on those lands that would not otherwise proceed.

Economic Survival for the region's communities

TFR is responding in part to the need to create sustainable economic activity in Southeast Alaska, which is undergoing a dramatic outmigration of rural residents, with increasing numbers of communities at risk of losing their schools due to falling enrollment. Forest stewardship includes significant job opportunities. In fact, each acre of treatment represents at least one direct man-day of labor. Use of any previously unallocated funds for forest stewardship initiatives in Southeast Alaska will go far to address the critical need for jobs and economic stimulus in our region.

The TFR appreciates your consideration of our request.

Adopted by the Tongass Futures Roundtable on May 22, 2009