

USDA Announces Southeast Alaska Sustainability Strategy, Initiates Action to Work with Tribes, Partners and Communities

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WASHINGTON, July 15, 2021 — The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced today a new *Southeast Alaska Sustainability Strategy* to help support a diverse economy, enhance community resilience, and conserve natural resources. Through this strategy, USDA will consult with Tribes and Alaska Native corporations, and engage partners and communities in a collaborative process to invest approximately \$25 million in financial and technical resources in sustainable opportunities for economic growth and community well-being and identify priorities for future investments.

As a key part of Southeast Alaska Sustainability Strategy, USDA will end large-scale old growth timber sales on the Tongass National Forest and will instead focus management resources to support forest restoration, recreation and resilience, including for climate, wildlife habit and watershed improvement. Small and micro old growth sales will still be offered for community consumption and cultural uses such as totem poles, canoes and tribal artisan use. USDA will also initiate a rulemaking this summer that will propose to restore 2001 Roadless Rule protections on the Tongass National Forest, returning stability and certainty to the conservation of 9.3 million acres of the world's largest temperate old growth rainforest.

Secretary Tom Vilsack has directed leaders of multiple USDA agencies, including the Forest Service, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and Rural Development, to consult with Tribes and work together with partners and communities in Southeast Alaska to identify priorities for investment that reflect the diverse needs and opportunities in the region, including for recreation, fisheries and the fishing industry,

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mariculture, renewable energy, sustainable timber management including for young growth, traditional and customary cultural uses, and carbon sequestration.

“We look forward to meaningful consultation with Tribal governments and Alaska Native corporations, and engaging with local communities, partners, and the State to prioritize management and investments in the region that reflect a holistic approach to the diverse values present in the region,” said Secretary Vilsack. “This approach will help us chart the path to long-term economic opportunities that are sustainable and reflect Southeast Alaska’s rich cultural heritage and magnificent natural resources.”

Over the next 30 days, USDA will stand up a locally-based team to consult with Tribal governments and Alaska Native corporations, and to meet with stakeholders, communities, and partners to identify practical opportunities in the near term to deploy up to \$25 million in additional funding and technical assistance for projects and workforce development in the region. The team will also recommend opportunities for longer-term investments that are responsive to Tribal and local priorities for sustainable economic development in Southeast Alaska, and supportive of ongoing partnerships. For example, the team will seek ways to complement the work of the Indigenous Guardians Network, the Sustainable Southeast Partnership, the Hoonah Native Forest Partnership, the Keex’ Kwaan Community Forest Partnership, Tribal Conservation Districts, the Southeast Conference, and the Forest Service and NRCS’s Joint Chiefs’ Restoration Initiative project. The team will also build on collaborative work between the State and the Forest Service, Rural Development’s work with municipalities, tribal governments, Alaska Native corporations and other partners on community and economic development, and other partnerships that reflect principles of collaboration and respect for Indigenous knowledge that are building trust and opportunity in Southeast Alaska.

USDA’s actions are intended to support local economies and preserve Alaska’s expansive old growth temperate rainforest, a resource that is increasingly rare globally. The Southeast Alaska Sustainability Strategy will help advance economic, ecologic, and cultural sustainability in Southeast Alaska in a manner that is directed by local voices and which builds on the region’s private-sector economic drivers of tourism, fishing, and recreation. These actions directly support the Biden-Harris Administration’s efforts to address climate change at scale and provide both local and global benefits. In implementing this strategy, USDA will prioritize respecting Tribal sovereignty and self-governance, renewing our commitment to Federal Trust responsibilities, and engaging in regular, meaningful, and robust consultation.

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Background

The Tongass National Forest has both national and international significance as the largest intact temperate rainforest in the world, representing nearly a third of all old-growth temperate rainforests left in the world. It holds more biomass per acre than any other rainforest in the world and stores more carbon than any other national forest in the United States. The Tongass is also home to more than 400 species – including 5 species of salmon that return to spawn in the Tongass each year. Large old-growth trees in the Tongass are critical for carbon sequestration, addressing the climate crisis and maintaining the productivity and health of the region’s fisheries and fishing industry.

Today’s announcement is in line with the Biden-Harris Administration’s approach to climate-smart forest management and conservation nationally, recognizing the importance of advancing the pace and scale of restoration and reforestation, addressing the challenge of wildfire, and retaining climate-resilient forests that provide ecologic, social and economic benefits and support rural community well-being.

USDA touches the lives of all Americans each day in so many positive ways. In the Biden-Harris Administration, USDA is transforming America’s food system with a greater focus on more resilient local and regional food production, fairer markets for all producers, ensuring access to safe, healthy and nutritious food in all communities, building new markets and streams of income for farmers and producers using climate smart food and forestry practices, making historic investments in infrastructure and clean energy capabilities in rural America, and committing to equity across the Department by removing systemic barriers and building a workforce more representative of America. To learn more, visit www.usda.gov

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