

Records show federal government, tasked with rewriting Tongass rules, also funded Alaska timber group

By Elizabeth Jenkins, Alaska's Energy Desk - Juneau - September 24, 2019



A Tongass National Forest clearcut is shown in this 2014 aerial view. (Photo by Ed Schoenfeld/CoastAlaska News)

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is in the middle of **making a crucial decision** about how it manages the Tongass National Forest.

In 2018, the state of Alaska was granted millions of dollars in federal funds to help facilitate dialogue about potential changes to the Roadless Rule, which could open up new areas of the Tongass to old-growth logging.

But a state records request reveals that a timber industry group was paid out of that grant for additional input, and some people involved in the rule-making process say that's not fair.

What is the Roadless Rule?

The Roadless Rule debate has dragged on for decades. **Last summer**, when the U.S. Forest Service announced it would be looking at how the rule applies to Alaska, it was a big deal.

And the state wasn't looking for a compromise. It **wanted a full exemption** — meaning Alaska wouldn't be burdened by the same restrictions nearly all national lands have to follow, making it easier to build new roads through parts of the Tongass.

Access roads for logging have been a sticking point for the region's **struggling timber industry**, which employs less people than a Walmart store. The remote location has made harvesting trees difficult, and the federal red tape made it nearly impossible, or so the argument goes.

Still, throughout this process, U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski has said that's not the only reason **she supports full exemption**. In an interview this month, the Alaska Republican reiterated that she supports more access in the Tongass.

"Not necessarily just to access to timber, but access at all," she said.

The state gets federal money to work on a state-specific rule

The Alaska Division of Forestry was awarded \$2 million shortly after the Forest Service’s announcement last summer. It’s actually a modification of a grant that’s part of the USDA State Fire Assistance program. It’s typically used for things like fighting wildfires or insect prevention.

But in this case, it was awarded to the state to work on the Roadless Rule as a cooperating agency. Essentially, the state would be a point person to the federal government leading up to a final decision.

“I was kind of astonished about that,” said Andy Stahl, the executive director of Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics, a watchdog group.

He said it’s not uncommon for the federal agency to grant states money. But given the circumstances in Alaska, he thinks this grant presents a conflict.

“The state has said, ‘Change the rule.’ And the federal government, which wrote the rule ... turns around and says, ‘Here’s \$2 million to help you convince us to change the rule.’ And that’s just weird,” Stahl said.

How the state spent the money

To date, the state has spent close to \$500,000 on a variety of things, like putting together a citizen advisory committee. Last fall, former Alaska Gov. Bill Walker **appointed a team of people** representing diverse perspectives for that committee, from conservation groups to timber interests.

Together, they **provided important feedback** to top federal officials on how the Roadless Rule should apply to Alaska.

But the Alaska Forest Association — a timber industry group — has gotten another opportunity to weigh in. An opportunity that comes with a payment.

So far, the Alaska Forest Association has been given more than \$200,000 in funds from the \$2 million grant the state got from the Forest Service in 2018.

And there’s potentially more coming.

[Click here to view the complete record.](#)

The Alaska Forest Association is under two contracts with the state, signed in March of this year, worth up to \$360,000. The group is providing the industry’s perspective — how its business will be affected by changes to the Roadless Rule and work plans moving forward.

Stahl said the the Forest Service couldn’t have granted this money to the Alaska Forest Association directly, because the grant is being managed under state laws.

But he’s confused why the money is being given to a group with a clear agenda.

“Nobody in their right mind would turn to that organization for the unvarnished, dispassionate facts,” Stahl said. “You’d go hire a private consultant.”

But Chris Maisch, the director of the Alaska Division of Forestry, disagrees.

“We want a party that has the expertise and knowledge to give us an accurate answer, so that will inform our policy,” Maisch said.

He said spending a portion of the federal grant this way shouldn't come as a surprise. The state **regularly partners** with stakeholder groups.

And since the fate of the timber industry is being considered, an industry group like the Alaska Forest Association makes the most sense in this role.

"The state has a vested interest in continuing the industry, and that's what we're trying to do," Maisch said. "That's the whole purpose behind the Roadless Rule petition."

Another cooperating agency

Joel Jackson, the tribal president of the Organized Village of Kake, doesn't think that's OK.

Like the state, the tribal government is another cooperating agency. They're also supposed to be providing context to the Forest Service as the decision gets made.

But unlike the state, Kake wasn't granted any federal money to help make its case.

"We didn't get any funding for staff to be working on (the Roadless Rule)," Jackson said. "And that's very, very important, because we have limited funds."

At times, Jackson said the small tribal government **has scrambled to meet deadlines** and provide meaningful comments.

If major changes are made to how the Tongass is managed, he said there's a lot at stake for the village.

For example, he's worried about food security. Historically, large-scale industrial logging **damaged salmon streams**.

"I want the people to know who don't live out in the rural villages how important the salmon are to our people," Jackson said.

The Forest Service wouldn't provide comments for this story. Though the state said the Forest Service is aware of how the grant money is being spent.

An announcement on the Roadless Rule decision was expected to come out in draft form this summer, but it's been delayed. **A national report suggests**, at Gov. Mike Dunleavy's urging, that President Donald Trump's administration is now working on a full Alaska exemption.

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