



Interior bill provides millions for Southeast

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A \$32 billion federal appropriations bill heading to the Senate floor has broad consequences for timber, hunting and recreation in Southeast.

Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, said in a conference call with Alaska reporters on Thursday that the Interior appropriations bill is a move to “figure out how we can provide some much-needed stability when our state is looking at some serious fiscal issues.”

Murkowski, chairwoman of an Interior appropriations subcommittee and the powerful Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, said she’s “looking to build out an economy, create healthy communities (and) deal with some of those issues that we struggle with,” pointing to Alaska’s rates of domestic violence, suicide and other mental health problems.

If signed into law, the bill would dedicate millions of dollars in federal funding to southern Southeast Alaska.

It includes cash for programs directly affecting the region: payment in lieu of taxes to local governments, the State of Alaska’s revolving loan funds for water infrastructure, the U.S. Forest Service’s timber program and its recreation program, small tribes, and state and federal subsistence programs.

The bill doesn’t address the Secure Rural Schools program, which is still set to expire this year.

Many of the bill’s changes are made to the Forest Service budget.

In fiscal year 2017, the bill would appropriate \$390 million for the Forest Service’s nationwide timber program — \$15 million more than the current budget.

Along with the additional funding, the bill delays for an unspecified time the latest amendment to the Tongass Land Management Plan and the Forest Service transition to a young growth timber program.

It requires the Forest Service to perform an inventory of young growth forests and determine when the trees will be mature enough to harvest before moving to young growth-focused timber sales.

A similar proposal is being made in the House, where Rep. Don Young, R-Alaska, pushed an amendment to his 2015 lands bill that would require the same delay to the Tongass plan.

Young spokesman Matt Shuckerow said that transitioning to young growth so soon was “essentially killing an industry” in Southeast.

“We want to see a delay on this until there can be proper inventory done,” Shuckerow said on Thursday, noting a House version of the appropriations bill was imminent.

In March, Viking Lumber announced it had a year and a half of economical timber, after which its Prince of Wales Island mill would close.

At the same time, Southeast Conference revealed that Alcan Forest Products and Sealaska, which manages its own timber program, were worried about dwindling Forest Service timber.

The bill directs the Forest Service to offer timber sales in the Tongass while the young growth inventory would be performed, Murkowski said.

She also noted that the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, which she also chairs, is also looking into Forest Service timber.

“I wish that we could be doing more to provide for greater opportunities for reliable timber sales and also economic timber sales,” she said. “We’re trying to advance this as rapidly as we can.”

The appropriations bill dedicates \$264 million to the Forest Service recreation budget and puts a wall between the recreation and firefighting budgets.

In recent years, the Forest Service has pulled money out of recreation to prepare for active wildfire seasons, a practice Murkowski criticized as “fire borrowing.”

In the Tongass National Forest, it meant a limited recreation program. The agency made plans in 2014 to cut almost all of its local recreation activity except for the Misty Fjords National Monument and maintenance of Ward Lake trails.

The appropriations bill includes a one-year delay of the Waters of the United States rule from the Environmental Protection Agency that has been roundly criticized by pro-development Republicans and the Alaska delegation.

It provides cash for tribal management of subsistence programs and funding for the certification of Sealaska cultural sites.

The federal payment in lieu of taxes program is expected to provide more than \$1 million to the Ketchikan Gateway Borough this year, according Borough Manager Dan Bockhorst. The appropriations bill dedicates \$480 million for the program nationwide, an increase from this year.

There are several other Southeast-focused appropriations in the bill:

- \$5.5 million for the Forest Service to clean up a closed mine site at Bokan Mountain. Ucore Rare Metals’ rare earth project can’t begin operations until the site of a former uranium operation is decontaminated, according to Murkowski’s office.
- \$4.6 million directly to small tribal governments.
- \$300,000 for the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the U.S. Geological Survey to partner with Southeast tribes and perform water quality tests near transboundary rivers that might be affected by mines in British Columbia.