



U.S. Department of Agriculture Releases Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Alaska Roadless Rule

WASHINGTON, Sept. 24, 2020 – The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) today announced the upcoming publication of a Final Environmental Impact Statement that describes the environmental effects of six alternatives, including whether the Tongass National Forest should be exempted from the 2001 Roadless Rule.

A copy of the final statement will be available [on the project website](#) after a notice is published in the Federal Register.

Consistent with applicable regulations, there is a 30-day waiting period before a final Record of Decision and rule would be issued by the Secretary of Agriculture.

For nearly two years, the USDA Forest Service reviewed citizen input provided through public meetings and subsistence hearings, written public comments, government-to-government consultations with federally recognized tribes and Alaska Native corporations, and engagement with cooperating agencies.

Background:

In 2001, the USDA adopted the Roadless Area Conservation Rule (2001 Roadless Rule). The roadless rule prohibits road construction, and cutting, selling or removing timber within inventoried roadless areas, with certain exceptions. The 2001 Roadless Rule applies nationwide and includes more than 45 million acres of national forests and grasslands. Currently, 9.2 million acres -- around 55% -- of the Tongass National Forest are designated and managed as inventoried roadless areas, which has limited economic opportunities in some areas.

In January of 2018, the State of Alaska petitioned the Secretary of Agriculture to consider exempting the Tongass National Forest from the 2001 Roadless Rule. In response, the USDA, Forest Service, and the State of Alaska agreed to examine state-specific rulemaking. In June 2018, the Secretary directed the Forest Service to begin evaluating state-specific roadless rule for Alaska.

Part of this evaluation is governed by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which requires federal agencies to analyze significant environmental impacts of proposed actions through a thorough and public process. The specifics of the NEPA process vary according to the circumstances, but federal agencies solicit public involvement at significant steps in the process, which begins with determining the scope of the analysis and ends with publishing the final decision.

The NEPA process began in August 2018, when the Forest Service published a Notice of Intent to conduct an environmental impact statement on a potential roadless rule exemption for the Tongass National Forest and solicited public comments on the scope of the analysis. In October 2019, the Forest Service published a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) and proposed Rule for a 60-day public comment period. The Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) responds to substantive public comments to the draft, contains additional analysis of management options and identifies the preferred alternative to fully exempt the Tongass National Forest from the 2001 Roadless Rule.

The 30-day waiting period will provide time for the Secretary to consider the purpose and need, weigh the alternatives, balance objectives and issue a record of decision on the final rule. Any record of decision on the final rule will not directly authorize any ground-disturbing activities.