



Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility

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April 3, 2017

Sen. Pat Roberts, Chairman
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC, 20510

Sen. Debbie Stabenow, Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry
SH-133 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC, 20510

RE: Commercial Timber Fraud – Tongass National Forest

Dear Chairman Roberts and Ranking Member Stabenow:

I am writing you on behalf of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) concerning disturbing matters occurring in an agency within your Committee's jurisdiction. We have obtained internal U.S. Forest Service (USFS) documents detailing how recent timber sales from Alaska's vast Tongass National Forest have been financial as well as ecological debacles.

In addition, efforts by USFS staff to address these issues have been rebuffed and have met with official retaliation.

PEER is urging you to examine these concerns and to press [the upcoming nominees for the Chief of the Forest Service and the Agriculture Undersecretary for Natural Resources & Environment](#) to take steps to ensure that all future timber sales protect both the forest resources and the taxpayer's pocketbook.

One key document, a June 20, 2016 Forest Service "Washington Office Activity Review," examined two large Tongass timber sales and found –

- Staggering monetary losses in each, "close to 2 million" in one sale, an amount "more than double the original stumpage" according to a post-harvest Monitoring Report. In the other sale, Forest Service maladministration led to "a reduction in sale value exceeding

\$1,700,000”;

- Despite being stewardship sales to improve forest health, the agency allowed companies to ignore prescriptions by “favoring removal in the larger diameter, more valuable species groups, such as western red cedar and spruce” while significantly undercutting far less valuable hemlock; and
- Required law enforcement timber theft prevention inspections appear to have been bypassed. Nor could the forest produce a written contract or other “pertinent documentation” for this high-volume sale. That sale also allowed “purchaser selection of trees without prior marking” and the forest’s only follow-on monitoring was completely “reliant on the purchaser’s own data.”

This Review concluded with a call for “an independent review [to] inform solutions and prevent similar issues in future timber and stewardship contracts.” This call has apparently fell on deaf ears, which is the reason for this letter.

Besides the U.S. taxpayer interests, local Alaskan communities are disadvantaged, as well. Under the National Forest Receipts program and the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act, a portion of all Tongass timber sale proceeds go to local communities and schools. Depressed sale values therefore cost both the U.S. taxpayers and Alaskan schoolkids.

These were also stewardship sales using harvests to reach prescribed tree species cut criteria but they lacked any “defined process for independently confirming whether the criteria is being met. This obfuscates the acceptability of the end result.” Another issue the review identified was temporary timber roads improperly left open “for several years following commercial activity.”

In short, we are asking you to take steps to ensure that new leadership in and overseeing the USFS. are committed to ensuring that future sales yield the fair market value they are supposed to produce and protect the forest resource.

I am happy to provide you with any additional information in regard to this matter. Thank you for your attention to our request.

Sincerely,

Jeff Ruch
Executive Director