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Tongass timber sale on Kuiu Island challenged

Natalie M. Henry, *Greenwire* Northwest reporter

PORTLAND, Ore. -- Environmental groups and an Alaska-based American Indian tribe are suing the Forest Service over plans to cut 19.5 million board feet (mmbf) of timber from Kuiu Island, a part of the Tongass National Forest, charging the agency with violating two forest management laws and overestimating the economic benefits of the sale. The Forest Service has justified the Threemile timber sale, which will involve cutting in roadless areas, on grounds that the project will provide wood for small, family-operated sawmills that depend upon the Tongass for their livelihood. Tongass spokesman Kent Cummins estimated that the trees cut under the leases should generate as many as 86 local jobs over three to five years.

But according to plaintiffs challenging the sale, the leases are not economically viable because they will cost the government between \$800,000 and more than \$1 million over the course of the project. "Threemile is a classic example of the kind of logging that doesn't make sense for the Tongass," said Buck Lindekugel of the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council, one of the plaintiffs. "The Forest Service keeps pushing timber sales in roadless wild lands where logging hurts local communities instead of helping them."

SEACC is joined in the lawsuit by the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Sierra Club, [the Center for Biological Diversity](#), the Wilderness Society and the Organized Village of Kake, a federally recognized Indian tribe.

Among other things, the lawsuit claims the timber sale will ruin wildlife habitat and subsistence hunting for the 550 inhabitants of Kake, thus violating the Tongass Timber Reform Act and National Forest Management Act. "We've gotten deer, fish, shellfish and greens from the island for generations," said Scott Jackson, a Kake hunter and tribal member.

Plaintiffs further argue that the service is using a flawed economic formula to determine the market demand for timber in Southeast Alaska, which is leading the service to offer unnecessary timber sales like the Threemile sale. According to Lindekugel, the service's current demand estimate is 150 mmbf, but mills consumed an average of just 44 mmbf annually over the last four years. "They don't need that wood to meet the demand," Lindekugel said.

Cummins noted that the service's market demand formula, while containing some errors, was upheld by a federal judge in another recent challenge by some of the same plaintiffs. The final outcome of that suit, which involves several timber sales, has yet to play out. Environmentalists successfully advanced the case to the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which issued an injunction halting one of the upcoming timber sales until it could hear the matter (*Greenwire*, Oct. 20).

Cummins further noted that while the Threemile sale is proposed in a roadless area, the Tongass forest plan only allows logging on 2 percent of the forest's roadless areas. The Threemile sale happens to be one of them. "We agree with people who want roadless areas protected," he said.