

## **FORESTS: Lawsuit seeks to end logging in Alaska roadless areas (12/22/2009)**



**Noelle Straub, E&E reporter**

A coalition of Alaska Natives, recreation groups and environmentalists today filed a federal lawsuit aiming to restore logging and road-building restrictions in large swaths of Alaska's Tongass National Forest.

The lawsuit, filed in U.S. District Court for the District of Alaska, asserts that the Tongass' exemption from the 2001 roadless rule was illegally adopted. The groups say the areas are important to Alaskans for hunting, fishing, traditional subsistence uses, tourism and recreation, and are vital internationally to soak up carbon and combat global warming.

The roadless rule granted blanket protection to about 58 million acres of national forests nationwide but has been mired in legal battles ever since President Clinton put it in place just before leaving office. In 2003, the Bush administration, settling a lawsuit brought by the state of Alaska, exempted the Tongass from the rule.

The groups dispute the reasons the government gave for the exemption. The Agriculture Department had said the roadless rule prevented the construction of utility lines and roads needed to connect communities in southeast Alaska, caused uncertainty for timber companies due to litigation and could cause the loss of 900 jobs.

The lawsuit argues that nearly all communities in southeast Alaska that are capable of being connected by logging roads have already been connected, that the roadless rule would have minimal impact on the development of utility corridors, that the exemption itself would cause more lawsuits and that there were fewer than 900 jobs attributable to the Tongass timber sale program.

The groups also charge that the government did not study and develop reasonable alternatives to the exemption, as required under National Environmental Policy Act procedures.

Earthjustice and the Natural Resources Defense Council filed the lawsuit on behalf of the Organized Village of Kake, Alaska Wilderness Recreation & Tourism Association, Boat Co., Sierra Club, Southeast Alaska Conservation Council, Tongass Conservation Society, Greenpeace, Wrangell Resource Council, Center for Biological Diversity, Defenders of Wildlife and Cascadia Wildlands.

The Tongass is the country's largest national forest and contains about 29 percent of the world's remaining unlogged coastal temperate rain forests, the groups said.

Numerous specific timber sales proposed in the roadless areas of the Tongass have been challenged in court by environmental groups.

USDA did not return requests for comment by deadline.