

**Alaska Wilderness League \* Defenders of Wildlife \* Environmental Protection Information Center  
Klamath Forest Alliance \* National Audubon Society \* Sierra Club \* The Wilderness Society**

The Honorable John A. Barrasso  
Chairman, Subcommittee on Public Lands,  
Forests & Mining  
Committee on Energy & Natural Resources  
United States Senate  
366 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Ron Wyden  
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Public  
Lands, Forests & Mining  
Committee on Energy & Natural Resources  
United States Senate  
366 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

October 7, 2015

Dear Chairman Barrasso and Ranking Member Wyden:

We are writing to express our opposition to S. 872, the Unrecognized Southeast Alaska Native Communities Recognition and Compensation Act and S. 1955, the Alaska Native Veterans Land Allotment Equity Act. S. 872 would establish five new village corporations in Southeast Alaska and give away over 115,000 acres of public lands in the Tongass National Forest to these newly-created private entities, while S. 1955 would reopen the process of transferring more than 1,000 scattered private inholdings of up to 160 acres each throughout the Tongass. The Tongass National Forest is a national treasure and the engine of the region's economy - transferring these valuable lands into private ownership endangers the region's wildlife and sustainable economy, as well sets a precedent to reopen lands claims settled through previous law.

Encompassing some of the largest remaining tracts of coastal temperate rainforest left on earth, the Tongass is a wealth of wildlife and scenic beauty. It provides valuable habitat for an array of fish and wildlife, including black and grizzly bears, the Alexander Archipelago Wolf and the greatest concentration of bald eagles in the world. More than 5,000 salmon streams host five species of Pacific salmon that sustain wildlife, communities, and the economy. The extraordinary natural beauty and bounty of the Tongass support thousands of jobs in the tourism, recreation, and fishing industries in southeast Alaska. These sustainable industries generate around \$2 billion annually. Transferring pristine old-growth forest to private interests could limit access to currently public lands or lead to development that threatens the regional economy.

When the "Sealaska" legislation was enacted last year—conveying more than 70,000 acres of the Tongass to the Sealaska Corporation—the Alaska delegation touted it as finally settling Alaska Native land claims under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 (ANCSA). However, S. 872 would circumvent ANCSA for five communities (Haines, Ketchikan, Petersburg, Tenakee, and Wrangell) that did not meet criteria for village corporation status when the act was passed and grant them additional public lands beyond the cap negotiated in that act. Since these communities were not eligible to form village corporations through ANCSA, community members were granted extra at-large shares of the regional Sealaska Corporation and thus benefitted from the passage of the Sealaska legislation last year. In addition to privatizing more than 115,000 acres of the Tongass National Forest, likely opening it up to

clearcutting, passage of this bill would raise new issues of fairness for the more than 80 other communities that did not qualify for village corporation status under ANCSA.

S. 1955 also makes significant and potentially precedent-setting changes to previously settled land claims by reopening the process for Alaska Native Veterans of Vietnam to apply for parcels of land currently owned by the federal government. In 1998 and 2000, legislation was passed to allow Alaska Native veterans of Vietnam and their descendants who may have missed their opportunity to apply for land transfers due to active duty, and the Bureau of Land Management conducted a rapid assessment and land transfer process. This bill seeks to reopen the process and broaden the lands that are eligible for withdrawal to include vulnerable public lands such as wildlife refuges, national forests, wilderness areas, national defense withdrawn lands, and lands selected by, or conveyed to, the State of Alaska or an Alaska Native Corporation – creating issues of fairness to other Vietnam veterans and Alaska Natives and widely and needlessly disrupting settled or nearly-settled land claims. There is also significant concern that granting additional scattered private inholdings on public lands would limit public access to the surrounding public domain.

If enacted, S. 872 and S. 1955 would transfer a significant amount of land out of the public trust and into private hands, putting Southeast Alaska's remaining pristine old-growth forest, wildlife, and sustainable economy in jeopardy. The bills would create new conflicts over land ownership in our largest national forest, as well as pose new management challenges for the agencies that administer the Tongass and other public lands. We strongly ask that you OPPOSE both of these bills if they come to a vote.

Sincerely,

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