



THE STATE
of **ALASKA**
GOVERNOR MIKE DUNLEAVY

Department of Natural Resources

OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER

550 West 7th Avenue, Suite 1400
Anchorage, AK 99501-3561
Main: 907.269-8431
Fax: 907-269-8918

May 25, 2022

Secretary Thomas J. Vilsack
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250
agsec@usda.gov
Tom.Vilsack@osec.usda.gov

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

I would greatly appreciate your attention and action on an important opportunity and need related to updating scientific field studies for critical and strategic minerals in Southeast Alaska.

In your announcement of the Southeast Alaska Sustainability Strategy on July 15, 2021, you directed leaders of multiple U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) agencies, including the Forest Service, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and Rural Development, “to consult with Tribes and work together with partners and communities in Southeast Alaska to identify priorities for investment that reflect the diverse needs and opportunities in the region.”

Responsible exploration, development, and production of mineral resources is an integral part of Southeast Alaska’s economy and would meet the needs of both the region and the nation, consistent with your directive. The mining industry saw the largest increase in wages of any sector across the region in 2020, growing by 9%. There were 861 annual average mining jobs in Southeast Alaska, with a payroll of \$103 million. The average annual mining wage was \$120,000 in 2020, more than double the overall regional wage of \$53,635.¹

Mineral resources occurring within the boundaries of the Tongass National Forest (Tongass) include gold, silver, molybdenum, and uranium, and nationally designated “strategic” and “critical” minerals such as lead, zinc, copper, tungsten, and platinum group metals. The 2008 Forest Plan Amendment provided a summary of Mineral Resource Inventory and Development potential on the Tongass including identified mineral resources and undiscovered resources. There has been no update to mineral inventories since that time.²

The production of minerals from the Tongass, however, is increasingly important to the regional economy of Southeast Alaska and to the national supply chains needed to supply the advanced technology and renewable energy needs of the entire country. Inventories that identify mineral resources, as well as the permitting and authorization processes that allow existing mines to continue

¹ Rain Coast Data (2021). *Southeast Alaska by the Numbers 2021*. Published for the Southeast Conference. <https://www.seconference.org/publication/southeast-alaska-by-the-numbers-2021/>. Accessed 5/18/2022.

² USDA/USFS (2016). Tongass Land and Resource Management Plan, Final Environmental Impact Statement, Plan Amendment. (June 2016). R10-MB-769e, f. P. 3-351 to 3-353.

and expand operations and new prospects to advance their developments, are increasingly critical for the USDA and Forest Service to fulfill their missions.

The identified mineral resources on the Tongass are described in Coldwell (1990)³, which is the most recent comprehensive study of mineral resources for the entire Tongass completed by the U.S. Bureau of Mines. Coldwell (1990) estimated the gross metal value of the identified mineral resources within the boundaries of the Tongass at \$37.1 billion (expressed as 1988 dollars). Highest among the individual minerals were molybdenum (\$14.4 billion) and iron (\$12.7 billion), with gold third at \$2.26 billion.⁴ These show the significant economic potential mineral resources present in the Tongass.

A subsequent study completed by the U.S. Geologic Survey (Brew et al. 1991) estimated the gross metal value of undiscovered mineral resources on the Tongass at \$28.3 billion (expressed as 1988 dollars). Highest among the individual minerals were copper (\$6.8 billion), iron (\$4.6 billion), molybdenum (\$4.35 billion), and tin (\$3.4 billion).⁵

Clearly, the Tongass National Forest holds significant mineral resources that present tangible economic and strategic opportunities at local, regional, state, and national levels. The State recommends that the USDA, Forest Service fund completion of a comprehensive study of mineral resources for the entire Tongass as part of the Southeast Alaska Sustainability Strategy; effectively updating Coldwell (1990) and Brew et al. (1991). Both studies, while containing important information, could be significantly improved upon with the new technology, imagery, and data gathering available today – and with a better understanding of the demand for and value of critical minerals in the fast-evolving modern technology and manufacturing industries.

Investments to identify and describe the mineral resources of Southeast Alaska meets the objectives of the Southeast Alaska Sustainability Strategy and the Biden Administration’s policy that “ensuring a robust, resilient, sustainable, and environmentally responsible domestic industrial base to meet the requirements of the clean energy economy, such as the production of large-capacity batteries, is essential to our national security and the development and preservation of domestic critical infrastructure.” Pursuant to this policy and Section 303 of the Defense Production Act of 1950, as amended (Act), President Biden directed the Secretary of Defense to “create, maintain, protect, expand, or restore sustainable and responsible domestic production capabilities of such strategic and critical materials by supporting feasibility studies for mature mining, beneficiation, and value-added processing projects; by-product and co-product production at existing mining, mine waste reclamation, and other industrial facilities; mining, beneficiation, and value-added processing modernization to increase productivity, environmental sustainability, and workforce safety; and any other such activities authorized under Section 303(a)(1) of the Act.”⁶

³ Coldwell, J.R. 1990. An Economic Analysis, Tongass Land Management Plan, Mineral Resource Inventory Inferred Reserves. Unpublished U.S. Bureau of Mines report, Alaska Field Operations Center, Juneau Branch. P. 154.

⁴ USDA/USFS (2008). Tongass Land and Resource Management Plan, Final Environmental Impact Statement, Plan Amendment. (January 2008). R10-MB-603c. P 3-356.

⁵ USDA/USFS (2008). Tongass Land and Resource Management Plan, Final Environmental Impact Statement, Plan Amendment. (January 2008). R10-MB-603c. p. 3-359. These totals cover the entire Tongass National Forest, and thus include areas currently withdrawn from mineral activity

⁶ Presidential Determination No. 2022-11 (March 31, 2022). *Memorandum on Presidential Determination Pursuant to Section 303 of the Defense Production Act of 1950, as amended*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2022/03/31/memorandum-on-presidential-determination-pursuant-to-section-303-of-the-defense-production-act-of-1950-as-amended/>. Accessed 5/18/2022.

Given the policies and directions of the Biden Administration, and the significant mineral opportunities found in Southeast Alaska and the Tongass National Forest, I respectfully request that adequate funding be allocated through the Southeast Alaska Sustainability Strategy to build upon and update Coldwell (1990) and Brew et al. (1991).

Finally, I would note that the Alaska Division of Geological and Geophysical Surveys has worked extensively in partnership with the U.S. Geological Survey on assessing critical minerals in other areas of Alaska, and you would have our robust and continued support if USDA wished to extend this cooperation to Southeast Alaska.

Sincerely,



Corri A. Feige
Commissioner

Cc:

Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III, U.S. Department of Defense
David Schmid, Regional Forester, USDA, Forest Service, R-10
Chad Van Ormer, Deputy Regional Forester, USDA, Forest Service, R-10
Earl Stewart, Forest Supervisor, USDA, Forest Service, Tongass National Forest