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August 4, 2022

The Honorable Tom Vilsack  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

I write to request an up-to-date, comprehensive evaluation of the mineral resources within the Tongass National Forest (Tongass) prior to any administrative reimposition of the ill-fitting 2001 Roadless Rule across millions of its acres.

Southeast Alaska has long experienced economic hardship due to a lack of infrastructure and year-round industry. From 2001 through 2020, the Roadless Rule made it harder and more expensive to build out needed infrastructure and a sustainable regional economy, so its reimposition can fairly be expected to result in further negative impacts. The Department of Agriculture (USDA) must therefore fully evaluate how reinstating the Roadless Rule will impact the resource development industries that are key to Southeast Alaska's economy, including and especially the mining industry.

The Tongass is home to abundant mineral resources, including precious metals such as gold and silver, platinum group metals, strategically important minerals such as uranium and copper, and numerous federally designated critical minerals such as rare earth elements. Many of the minerals found in the Tongass are necessary for clean technologies such as electric vehicles, advanced batteries, solar panels, and turbines for wind and hydropower; many of those technologies are actually more mineral-intensive than the systems they seek to replace.

Therein lies the problem. As you may know, our nation is already deeply dependent on foreign minerals. According to the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), the U.S. imported more than 50 percent of its supply of at least 47 minerals commodities in 2021, including 100 percent of its supply of 17 minerals. This dependence is growing, not diminishing. Many of the countries we now rely on for our supply of minerals are adversaries or strategic competitors who lack labor, safety, and environmental standards that are remotely close to our own. We maintain our dependence on these countries at our own risk and detriment.

We are also at a moment when respected independent agencies such as the World Bank and the International Energy Agency are projecting that global demand for minerals is set to skyrocket by orders of magnitude. With that in mind, we must develop and maintain stable domestic supply chains and produce enough to keep both minerals and the products built from them affordable. Production of the resources in the Tongass would greatly contribute to the accomplishment of that goal; conversely, locking them down and away from responsible development would harm our nation's economy, competitiveness, and security at a time when we can least afford it.

There is also no question that federal mineral estimates for the Tongass are outdated. In 1990, the U.S. Bureau of Mines issued a comprehensive study, Caldwell (1990), identifying the mineral resources in the Tongass region, and estimating the gross metal value of those resources at \$37.1 billion. USGS then issued a follow-on study, Brew et al. (1991), estimating the gross metal value of undiscovered mineral resources in the Tongass at \$28.3 billion. Given that these studies were completed decades ago, and significant advances have been made since then with regard to exploration technologies, satellite imagery, and data gathering, it is reasonable to assume that the value of the mineral resources in the Tongass is now far greater.

Alaskans, and all Americans, deserve to understand the full range of consequences that the reimposition of the Roadless Rule on the Tongass will have. As part of that analysis, it is critical that USDA provide an accurate, modern account of the vast mineral resources within the Tongass, as well as the current value of those resources, so that we can understand what a loss of access, or substantially higher development costs, will truly mean. We need to understand how the Roadless Rule's restrictions will impact mineral availability and affordability, the ability to transition to electric vehicles and other technologies, and our national security.

Therefore, I request that USDA work with USGS to provide a comprehensive update to the Caldwell (1990) and Brew et al. (1991) studies so that we can thoroughly understand the modern mineral potential of the Tongass. I further request this analysis be completed, made public for comment, and utilized in any final decision on the Roadless Rule for the Tongass—lest a hasty reimposition make needed minerals impossible to access or responsibly develop.

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to a prompt response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Lisa Murkowski". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "L".

Lisa Murkowski  
United States Senator