Dear Members of Congress:

As scientists working in diverse natural resource-related disciplines, we write with great concern for provisions in the Senate’s fiscal year 2018 spending bill for the Interior Department that threaten one of our country’s most important conservation laws—the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule—and the federal forests in Alaska that it protects. Section 509 of that bill would outright exempt our two largest national forests, the Tongass and the Chugach, from the Roadless Rule. Section 508 would overturn the Tongass management plan that adds protections for large “inventoried” roadless areas and other ecologically critical lands, and charts a transition away from logging old-growth forests. These riders pose grave threats to fish and wildlife populations (and the residents, visitors, and businesses dependent on them), our national interest in conserving vanishing wildlands, and the urgent task of limiting climate change.

The Roadless Rule, adoption and retention of which millions of Americans supported, was a critical step in preserving the invaluable benefits that intact forests provide to our country. Undisturbed roadless areas reduce flood threats and supply clean sources of drinking water to millions of Americans. They maintain the integrity and productivity of aquatic ecosystems throughout the nation. They are sanctuaries for wildlife, helping to prevent or alleviate the need to list imperiled species as threatened or endangered. And, as the realities of global climate change become ever more apparent, their importance in maintaining large forest carbon reserves is increasingly recognized as indispensable in mitigating adverse climate effects.

Nowhere are the benefits of protecting roadless areas and similar ecologically important lands greater than on the Tongass. With towering old-growth trees that can live 700-1,000 years, it is our country’s largest expanse of native forest and one of the last remaining intact coastal rainforests in the world. Together with the Chugach, it harbors a quarter of all inventoried roadless areas nationwide. Its ancient forests support the world’s largest breeding concentration of bald eagles, rare endemic taxa like the Alexander Archipelago wolf, and one of the highest densities of brown bears on the globe. Retaining the existing roadless areas of the Tongass is a “key element” in sustaining the region’s extraordinary salmon runs (and their commercial, subsistence, and recreational fisheries). The Tongass also represents North America’s largest carbon sink, some of the richest, most biologically productive forest on Earth, and twenty-nine percent of the world’s unlogged coastal temperate rainforest.

We urge you to vote against any bill containing these riders, for the sake of America’s publicly owned natural heritage, the fish, wildlife, biodiversity, and people dependent on its continued well-being, and our country’s leadership on native forest conservation that is vital to containing climate damage. Thank you for considering our views on this matter of national significance.
Respectfully yours,

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