

## **For Immediate Release, August 26, 2014**

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## **Lawsuit Takes On Devastating Old-growth Logging Project in Tongass National Forest**

### ***Suit Follows Scientist's Warning That Alexander Archipelago Wolves Are Threatened***

PRINCE OF WALES ISLAND, *Alaska*— Five conservation groups filed a [lawsuit](#) today to stop the U.S. Forest Service's Big Thorne timber project on Prince of Wales Island in southeast Alaska. Big Thorne is by far the largest U.S. Forest Service logging project on the Tongass National Forest since the region's two pulp mills closed about 20 years ago.

The lawsuit asks the court to find, among other things, that the federal government failed to heed research by Dr. David K. Person, a former Alaska Fish and Game wildlife biologist and foremost expert on [Alexander Archipelago wolves](#). A formal declaration by Person says that Big Thorne would "break the back" of the ecosystem dynamic between the wolves, deer and hunters on the island.

The geographically isolated Prince of Wales wolf population is known by state and federal biologists to have dropped sharply in recent years to a low but undetermined number. If the project proceeds, more than 6,000 acres of old-growth forest would be cut into nearly 150 million board feet of logs. This old-growth forest is a mix-aged group of trees, with the oldest approaching 1,000 years of age. What remains of it is increasingly important to wildlife.

"Prince of Wales Island is the most heavily logged part of southeast Alaska," said David Beebe of the Greater SE Alaska Conservation Community (GSACC). "The Big Thorne project would add to the enduring impacts to wildlife from massive clearcuts and about 3,000 miles of logging roads on the island, created beginning in the 1950s."

"Without enough old-growth winter habitat in the forest for shelter, deer populations plummet during deep-snow winters," explained Gabriel Scott, Alaska legal director for Cascadia Wildlands in Cordova. "And without enough deer to go around, wolves and hunters are direct competitors. That never ends well for the wolf, or for hunters, because deer are the wolves' primary prey. Big Thorne bites hard into necessary winter habitat."

"The other Big Thorne shoe dropping on Archipelago wolves is more roads," said Larry Edwards of Greenpeace. "With 3,000 miles of logging roads, a high road density, you get uncontrollable wolf poaching." Big Thorne's 46 miles of new roads would add to 580 miles in that project area already; another 37 miles would be reopened or reconstructed. "The Forest Service consistently circumvents its road density standard and guideline," he said.

"Big Thorne is the antithesis of the 'rapid transition' out of Tongass old-growth logging the Forest Service promised over four years ago," said the Center for Biological Diversity's Randi

Spivak. "Time's up. It's deeply irresponsible for the agency to proceed in the face of the need to end old-growth logging and of Dr. Person's dire warning about continuing a failed land-management scheme that will devastate deer and wolf populations."

The plaintiffs expressed outrage at the suppression of science the Forest Service and Parnell administration have committed with this project. Dr. Person first circulated his concerns within the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, where he worked at the time. The comments were buried by the agency and by higher-level state bureaucrats to implement Governor Parnell's "one voice" policy, which suppresses troublesome science in order to maximize logging.

Dr. Person's strongly held concerns were discovered through public records requests made by the plaintiff organizations. Then, after confronting the Forest Service with the material in comments on the Big Thorne draft environmental impact statement, the agency simply ignored its existence in the final statement and project decision.

"That gambit by the two governments backfired," said Scott. "The project was put on hold for nearly a year while a formal declaration by Dr. Person about Big Thorne's impacts to deer and wolves was reviewed. The declaration, prepared after Person quit ADF&G, was filed by the plaintiffs in an administrative appeal of the August 2013 Big Thorne decision.

A special six-person Wolf Task Force with personnel from the Forest Service, ADF&G and the federal Fish and Wildlife Service, reviewed the declaration. Opinion was evenly split, "unsurprisingly," Scott said, given political pressure and the state's one-voice policy. Breaking ranks was a Forest Service biologist who has done wolf research on the island.

"Nonetheless, the Forest Service is again proceeding with the project rather than delve further into the ecology, revise the EIS, and reconsider the decision," said Edwards. "We are suing to reverse that. And also to force revision of the Tongass forest plan into compliance with law that, if followed, would have avoided Prince of Wales' ecological mess in the first place."

"People from all continents and walks of life book passage on our educational cruises to see charismatic predators such as wolves in their natural habitat," said Joel Hanson, conservation program director with plaintiff The Boat Company. "But with this timber sale, the Forest Service proves once and for all that it is blind to the wolf's value as either a visitor attraction or vital component of a healthy coastal island ecosystem. It sees only trees, and pictures only the benefits of using forests as a commodity."

"This case is the last line of defense," said Chris Winter, at Crag Law Center who represents the conservation groups. "Otherwise, the Forest Service is going to log these species and the old-growth forests on Prince of Wales Island into oblivion." Crag Law Center, in Portland, Oregon, is a public interest environmental law firm that works from Northern Alaska to Northern California.