

Corri A. Feige
Commissioner

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Department of
Natural Resources

Anchorage, Alaska

STATE OF ALASKA

PRESS RELEASE

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Updated to correct public records requestor

DNR commissioner says USFS roadless grant used properly

(Anchorage, AK) – The Alaska Department Natural Resources used federal forestry grant funds legally and appropriately to analyze the economic impacts of implementing the federal “roadless rule” in Alaska, Commissioner Corri A. Feige said today.

Democrats on U.S. House and Senate resources committees have accused the State of improperly directing U.S. Forest Service (USFS) grant funds to the Alaska Forest Association (AFA), implying the State was misusing federal funds to influence federal policy in the interest of private industry. The allegations drew on results of a state public records request and story by Juneau public radio station KTOO-FM. The Southeast Alaska Conservation Council, a strong opponent of lifting the roadless rule, filed its own request for public records on the matter.

“The facts show DNR is using these grants exactly as intended – to help the Forest Service understand how roadless rule changes would affect Southeast Alaska,” Feige said. “DNR did everything right, and allegations to the contrary are as easy to refute as they are embarrassing for the accusers. It is unfortunate that Congressional leaders would impugn the State of Alaska and DNR staff before checking the facts.”

The Division of Forestry’s (DOF) many responsibilities include fighting fires throughout Alaska and providing expert information on the impact of federal land management policies on forests in the state. To that end, DOF in 2018 accepted a modification to an annual forest programs grant from USFS, which manages the Tongass National Forest in Southeast Alaska.

USFS drew on funds coded as “state fire assistance” funds” typically disbursed to help build state firefighting capacity, for \$2 million in grants that, matched with \$2 million in State funds, would support the state’s work as a cooperating agency in the Alaska-specific roadless rulemaking process.

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The grant approval language recognized that no more than \$1.7 million of the funds would be used to assemble a group representing diverse interests to consider and make recommendations on the roadless rulemaking, and to conduct economic, social and environmental analysis of the group's recommendations. AFA was contracted to provide economic analysis of commercial timber sales under each alternative, and to train USFS staff on how to produce economic timber sales.

While the accusing legislators claim the Organized Village of Kake had been shut out of the process, Feige said that not only is Kake one of six Southeast Alaska tribes identified as cooperating agencies along with the State in the rulemaking process, but also that the tribe had received travel funds as part of the federal grant. Kake's president, Joel Jackson, testified to the House Resources Committee on Nov. 13 in opposition to roads in the Tongass, and has met in Juneau with Jim Hubbard, the Department of Interior undersecretary for natural resources and environment, for government-to-government consultations on the issue.

Feige further noted that USFS has held both scoping meetings and public hearings on the draft roadless rule environmental impact study in Anchorage, Washington D.C., Juneau and up to 15 Southeast Alaska communities where public comments were collected.

Grant funds spent to date cover \$186,000 for a contractor to facilitate the public interest group meetings, including travel expenses. The State has not yet billed USFS under the grant for work completed by AFA, and could use state matching funds for that purpose. Remaining unspent funds will go to reduce buildup of hazardous fuel statewide, a typical use of such funds.

"DNR and USFS have collaborated effectively throughout the Tongass roadless rulemaking process," Feige said. "It is appalling that the public and other stakeholders are being intentionally misled about the integrity of that process by politicians and special interests who disagree with Secretary Purdue's apparent intent to select the "Full Exemption" as the preferred alternative. This type of manipulation simply should not be tolerated."

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