

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee Business Meeting to Consider Pending

Legislation

December 14th, 2023

Sen. Cantwell Remarks

[\[AUDIO\]](#) [\[VIDEO\]](#)

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you so much to you and the ranking member for holding today's important markup on critical public lands legislation.

On the docket and passed was a priority by Senator Murray Senate Bill 1254, the Wild Olympics Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. This is an important piece of legislation that would designate over 126,000 acres of Olympic Forest as wilderness and protect 464 miles of the Olympic Peninsula by designating them as wild and scenic rivers. So, I very much appreciate this legislation moving out of the committee.

I also appreciate the hard work my colleague from Alaska has done on S1889. But I want to explain for a minute, my reluctance to support this legislation in its current form. I believe we share some of the same issues that many have tried to discuss before this, and I'm concerned that they need to be addressed before we go to the floor.

This proposal addresses two very important issues, the Tongass National Forest and Tribal justice. And I've long worked to preserve the integrity of the Tongass and public lands. I've learned a lot about the unique biodiversity and the vast amount of carbon sequestration benefits of the Tongass.

And I also appreciate the efforts to provide meaningful land stewardship to these five Southeast Alaskan Native communities. An amount of challenging work has gone into working with local stakeholders to identify land parcels with the least use conflicts.

However, I think we also must consider the irreplaceable habitat and values of the undisturbed portions of ancient old growth forests that do exist in the Tongass, which would be conveyed under the ANCSA (Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act) corporation system.

So, the US Forest Service currently documented that the Tongass stores more carbon than any other national forest. Old growth trees in the Tongass are critical for sequestration, and addressing the climate, and maintaining productivity of the region's fisheries and of the fishing industry.

So, as I said, I appreciate my colleagues' efforts on this, but by not providing any conditions on the public lands that would be conveyed I am concerned that these critical environmental and economic benefits could be disturbed. So, I look forward to continuing to work with my colleague on this as we move to the floor.

Stewardship will maintain, I believe, a big priority and getting everybody to commit to that stewardship is what I'd hope to seek. So, thank you, Mr. Chairman.