

**Congress of the United States**  
Washington, DC 20510

November 18, 2019

Phillis K. Fong  
Inspector General  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Room 117-W Jamie Whitten Building  
1400 Independence Avenue SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Ms. Fong:

We write to request an investigation regarding the potential misuse of a recent U.S. Forest Service (USFS) grant to the State of Alaska. We are concerned by a recent news report indicating the State of Alaska used a federal fire assistance grant for non-fire purposes, including a subgrant to a timber industry stakeholder to support a rulemaking regarding roadless area management on the Tongass National Forest.

In January 2018, the State of Alaska requested that USDA consider creating a state-specific rule to exempt the Tongass National Forest from the Roadless Rule, a rule which establishes nationwide prohibitions on harvesting timber and road construction on certain National Forest Service lands in order to protect these lands. Alaska sought a full exemption from the rule.

According to a September 24, 2019 press report on Alaska Public Media,<sup>[1]</sup> the State of Alaska's Fire Staff Officer requested \$2 million in grant funding, apparently under a State fire assistance grant, which is typically used to help communities prevent and suppress wildfires. The documentation in this press report shows the purpose for seeking the grant funding was to cooperate and coordinate in carrying out the rulemaking to exempt the Tongass National Forest from the Roadless Rule. According to this press report, the State of Alaska awarded some of the funds from this grant to the Alaska Forest Association, an industry trade association advancing the business interests of Alaska's timber industry. The press report also notes that funding was not granted to other stakeholders, including the Organized Village of Kake, a tribal government that has concerns about the impact of large-scale logging on their community.

The Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act of 1978's grant authorities appear to primarily, or even wholly, provide financial assistance to states for the prevention and suppression of fires on non-Federal forest lands. However, Alaska's revised application for these funds contains no mention of fire activities and indicates they will be used to help fulfill their cooperating agency responsibilities for their petition to the USFS to revise the Roadless Rule on federal lands.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Jenkins, E. 'Faced with an important decision on the Tongass, why is the federal government supporting Alaska's timber industry?' *KTOO Public Media*, 24 September 2019, <https://www.ktoo.org/2019/09/24/faced-with-an-important-decision-on-the-tongass-why-is-the-federal-government-supporting-alaskas-timber-industry/>. Accessed 5 November 2019.

The Tongass is our largest National Forest and is essential to addressing the climate crisis. It is critical that we ensure this taxpayer funded grant was properly awarded and used. We request an investigation into whether the Forest Service properly granted these funds to the State of Alaska and whether the funds were used appropriately.

In reviewing this matter, we ask that you investigate the following questions:

1. Under what specific grant program was the \$2 million grant to the State of Alaska awarded, and was the grant properly awarded, including being awarded for purposes allowed under the grant program?
2. What was this grant funding used for, and was it properly used by the State of Alaska and any subgrantees, including the Alaska Forest Association?
3. Were other Alaska stakeholders such as the Organized Village of Kake made aware of or awarded any funding to support their abilities to assist in the rulemaking?
4. What communication between the USFS, the State of Alaska, the Alaska Forest Association, or any of its members led to the State's request for this grant funding?
5. Is it permissible for the USFS to grant federal funds to a state to enable it to help convince USDA to grant the rule change it had requested?

Sincerely,



Debbie Stabenow  
Ranking Member  
U.S. Senate Committee on  
Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry



Raúl M. Grijalva  
Chairman  
U.S. House Committee on  
Natural Resources