

Opportunities to improve access, infrastructure and permitting for outdoor recreation.

## **Introduction**

My name is Daniel Kirkwood of Juneau, Alaska. I am the General Manager of Pack Creek Bear Tours and the Co-Chair of the Visitor Products Cluster Working Group with the Juneau Economic Development Council. I am deeply grateful to be able to provide testimony on opportunities to improve access, infrastructure and permitting for outdoor recreation on public lands.

Alaska's public lands provide outstanding opportunities for our state's growing tourism sector. On the Tongass National Forest in southeast Alaska, the U.S. Forest Service provides essential services to operators including planning, permitting and managing commercial recreation. However, funding cuts and competing for limited agency resources has kept the Forest Service from adequately meeting the needs of our growing sector. Through the Juneau Economic Development Council, we have made specific recommendations to the Forest Service for improving the management of tourism. These recommendations, along with better ways of measuring the Forest Service's contribution to tourism, will help our sector continue to grow in Alaska.

## **Pack Creek Bear Tours**

At Pack Creek Bear Tours we provide one of the most outstanding outdoor experiences in the world. We fly clients by float plane into the Alaskan wilderness to see and photograph wild brown bears that congregate to chase the wild salmon that return to the Tongass National Forest each summer. The islands that we visit have the highest concentration of brown bears, or "grizzlies" in the country. This is a premium small group adventure with experienced, professional Alaskan guides. While we are a small company, we are just one of the hundreds of local businesses that cater to the growing number of visitors who are coming to Alaska each year.

Outdoor recreation is at the core of the visitor experience. People come for hiking, hunting, fishing, whale watching, paddling and exploring. Spectacular scenery, iconic fish and wildlife and unique cultures make this a world-class tourism destination. Access to vast beautiful places with glaciers, mountains and forests, bears and wild salmon is the true Alaskan experience. In my travels outside of Alaska and abroad, eyes light up when you say "Alaska." It is a destination that is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for most people. This is brand-recognition most companies only dream of.

## **Tourism and Recreation Economics and growth projections**

This year more than 1.3 million people will visit southeast Alaska on cruise ships, growing 14% in 2019 and with 5% additional growth 2020. According to Southeast Conference, tourism employment is up 12% from 2014 to 2017. During this time our earnings increased 23%. It's not just cruise ships. Air travel is up 13%, bringing the independent travelers who spend more money in our communities by staying in our hotels, eating in our restaurants. According to the McDowell Group, the tourism sector contributes over \$1 billion in economic activity in southeast Alaska each year.

While this growth is an outstanding opportunity, the challenge to our industry and the Forest Service is to accommodate expansion while preserving the outstanding, authentic experience for visitors and locals. Our industry experienced similar growth in the 1990s. Kirby Day of Princess Cruises led the Tourism Best Management Practices in Juneau, a voluntary and collaborative community program to

identify and decrease tourism impacts on residents and businesses. This award-winning program continues to evolve and be successful in Juneau and has been replicated in other ports. Innovators in the Forest Service have used this “Best Management Practices” model to address conflicts in remote parts of the Forest, such as crowding conflicts. These are examples of how the tourism industry is committed to working hard to be a good neighbor in our communities.

While tourism has clear economic benefits, it is closely tied to outdoor recreation. Outdoor recreation is an important part of the Alaskan culture and economy. According to the University of Alaska Center for Economic Development, Alaska has the highest rate of participation in outdoor recreation in the country, tied with Montana. Recreation overlaps with other important local cultural values, such as hunting, fishing, gathering, subsistence and traditional cultural activities. The UA Center for Economic Development report found that in-state consumer spending on outdoor recreation was nearly \$3.2 billion. Outdoor recreation was responsible for 29,000 direct jobs and contributed to 38,100 jobs state wide. One in ten jobs in Alaska is supported by outdoor recreation. Investments in trails, facilities and management will benefit Alaskans who use these resources.

### **JEDC Advocacy and working group**

The Juneau Economic Development Council convened the Visitor Products Cluster Working Group in 2011 as part of a sector-by sector or “cluster” approach to helping encourage positive economic development in Southeast communities. This group has collaborated with Forest Service staff to address the sector’s needs, concerns and opportunities. It has also become a way for the visitor sector to advocate to agency staff and elected officials. The success of this model has been the opportunity for the Forest Service to learn about how our businesses operate and for us to learn about their processes. The Visitor Products Working Group has brought competing businesses together with one voice. While we have had some positive developments and success, there is more to do.

Every single person who comes to southeast Alaska experiences the Tongass National Forest. Tourism is an important part of a working forest and the demands for outdoor recreation opportunities have changed drastically. The Forest Service provides essential support to the tourism economy by managing access and providing infrastructure but with growing visitor numbers the agency can’t be expected to do so without more resources. We look to the agency to ensure that we balance the opportunity for growth with the need to preserve the world-class experiences that the Tongass provides. Our group has identified ways for the Forest Service to improve recreation management. These recommendations include;

- Reverse the decline in appropriated funding for Recreation programs.
- Invest in improved permitting and infrastructure.
- Restore leadership and other recreation positions that facilitate good recreation and tourism planning and management.
- Apply consistent permit standards across districts, while retaining the expertise of individual permit administrators.
- Use a collaborative approach with permit holders and residents.

## **Access**

Tourism access is about ensuring that National Forest Recreation staff have the funding and direction to help us provide outstanding tourism products. The Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center and Recreation Area is the most visited center in Alaska. Improvements to infrastructure here are essential to accommodate increased numbers. Conversely, companies like mine, are not looking for infrastructure, but rather permitted access to natural, pristine places. We require beautiful places to go where we can offer solitude and avoid other groups. This requires the adequate staffing capacity of the Forest Service to plan, process permits and manage use in ways that maintain the exclusivity and character of our products.

Big or small, tourism operators are not asking for unlimited access. Rather, we are asking for the agency to proactively manage growth and work with us to find solutions to the problems inherent to a growing, changing industry. Investing in proactive and collaborative Forest-wide recreation planning, staffing and self-sustaining infrastructure will benefit access to our incredible recreation resources.

## **Infrastructure**

For remote-setting nature tours, undeveloped areas without significant infrastructure are key to meeting our client's expectations of Alaska. Our clients are no longer satisfied to just look, they want to touch and hike and explore. For example, companies like mine, UnCruise Adventures or Northwest Navigation may be looking for a few strategically located trails, or no trails at all. The undeveloped forest is what people want to experience. For front country sites like the Mendenhall Glacier Recreation Area, infrastructure is key to accommodating increased numbers. The Forest Service is currently undergoing a Master Plan process that could increase the sustainability and value of this Recreation Area to businesses and locals. We applaud the Forest Service for undertaking this Master Plan and thinking big-picture about both the challenges and opportunities. Through our collaborative efforts we have built trust and support for fees that will help pay for necessary improvements. We acknowledge that funds are tight nationwide for infrastructure, which is why we want to see more proactive, collaborative planning to develop self-sustaining infrastructure and support for existing facilities. Public private partnerships will continue to be an opportunity for this, but the agency needs to have the staff and time to be a good partner. For example, even if an operator wants to pay for a new project, the agency may not have the capacity to plan or maintain the project. Additionally, a company may offer to maintain a trail they use, but the agency cannot guarantee that they will be permitted to use that trail. If the Forest Service is going to rely on partnerships, they need to provide a workable and mutually beneficial partnership program.

## **Permitting**

Timely and flexible Special Use Permitting is the key to commercial access. Our permit administrators do excellent work. They know the resource, they understand our businesses. However, they are severely under-staffed. This creates long wait times for new permits and renewals, which impacts our ability to sell tours and plan for future growth. Too often, I believe, people in the agency say "no" to new tour ideas simply because there is not enough staff to keep up with their existing work load.

We have advocated that Congress and the Forest Service increase investments in staffing recreation management to better plan for, permit and manage reasonable access. We have advocated the agency

apply consistent permit application process and respond in a timely manner to permit applications. We have asked the Forest Service to convene meetings with permit holders and residents to offer constructive feedback on permits, infrastructure and partnerships.

### **Funding**

We recognize that the funding situation for the agency is challenging and constrained by increasing wildfire costs. We thank Senator Murkowski for her commitment to working with us and the Forest Service. Thank you, Senator, for sitting down with us and digging into these challenging issues. Thank you to this committee for addressing these funding challenges and seeking to meet our needs in Alaska. However, what funding is made available is still not enough to keep pace with the growing tourism sector, or plan for new tourism sector opportunities in rural communities.

### **Metrics for Measuring Success**

What we measure matters. We need the Forest Service to have congressional direction and enough funding to meet the visitor sector's growing need. The current Region 10 Leader's Intent for Recreation charts a course for the Forest Service to provide less support and fewer services for recreation and tourism in the face of increasing demand. We are working with Forest Service staff who are not adequately evaluated on their success in supporting tourism outcomes. Existing metrics for tourism and recreation are vague and poorly defined. For example, with increasing visitation at the Mendenhall, staff are measured against successfully developing things like "new recreation programs," which, while these new programs would be positive, this target fails to encourage efficient, necessary outcomes. New metrics that capture visitor numbers and economic contributions have been proposed for piloting in Region 10. These could be incorporated into strategic plans, budget justifications, reports to congress and the public. These metrics can ensure that the Forest Service has data to justify supporting diverse tourism experiences. The agency deserves credit for the successes they deliver to visitors, businesses and locals in the Tongass. New metrics could provide clear direction to encourage the Forest Service to engage on these issues.

### **Collaboration**

We believe that the Forest Service must embrace a proactive vision for tourism in the Tongass. This means engaging the industry to develop solutions, taking collaborative steps to support tourism businesses in southeast Alaska and ensuring that tourism resources remain intact. The Forest Service could mirror collaborative landscape-scale restoration programs underway in other parts of the country to deliver success for recreation and tourism. We need the Forest Service to plan, innovate and collaborate with the 33 communities of southeast Alaska. Due to the remote and rugged nature of Alaska, commercial guiding services are an essential part of helping Americans access their public lands. For our businesses, public lands are the key to our success. Places and resources for tourism should be maintained and improved for the economic contribution they make to the region's culture and economy. Thank you for your consideration and action on these important issues.