

In Alaska forest, Reagan biographer sees a winning GOP strategy

August 27 2020, by Benjamin J. Hulac, Cq-Roll Call



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Craig Shirley sees an opportunity in the trees.

The chairman of a conservative political advocacy group Ronald Reagan

founded in 1977, Shirley has bucked fellow conservatives by urging President Donald Trump to keep an existing ban on logging, vehicles, [road construction](#) and other industrial activity in the Tongass National Forest in Alaska.

"I can find no reason why this should be going on," Shirley, who leads Citizens for the Republic and wrote four books about the 40th president, said in an interview. "But like a lot of government bureaucracies and programs, they have a life of their own and nobody seems to know the beginning."

At the president's direction, the U.S. Forest Service proposed in October eliminating a policy known as the "roadless rule," which prevents the building of roads into pristine forests for logging and other purposes. The three-member Alaska delegation to Congress, plus Gov. Mike Dunleavy supported eliminating the rule. All are Republicans. In an environmental impact statement for the rule change, the Forest Service proposed exempting 9.2 million acres of the Tongass from the bans.

Shirley and other conservative figures, including former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee and Ed Rollins, a leader of the pro-Trump Great America PAC, which has spent \$6.2 million this cycle to reelect Trump, sent a letter in late July to the president urging him to maintain the protections.

The campaign emerged in the spring this year, as Republicans were deflecting blame from the president to China over his handling of the coronavirus pandemic response. The virus that causes COVID-19 first appeared in China and has led to the deaths of more than 170,000 Americans. The letter from Shirley's group draws on anti-China sentiment too.

"Our leaders must recognize this opportunity to assert our power over

China by not enabling them to destroy more of our lands for their profit," the letter says, adding that the administration should protect Tongass "to thwart the insidious efforts of China and promote American prosperity."

China surpassed Japan as the "primary destination" of Alaskan-logged wood in 2010, according to federal figures.

The Tongass is the largest old-growth forest, a category used to describe forests with large, old trees and complex ecosystems. It spans 16.7 million acres in southeast Alaska.

The Clinton administration finalized the roadless rule in 2001, and the provision, which applies to certain other national forests as well, has protected 58.5 million acres in 39 states and territories since.

Environmentalism can be a "winning issue" for Republicans, said Shirley, pointing to Sen. Cory Gardner, R-Colo., who is running for reelection touting his work passing a public lands bill.

Still, he said, Trump has been absent on the topic and Democrats have an edge: "I've always said the Republican Party does not have a good environmental answer."

The campaign by Shirley's group mirrors the debate over the Pebble Mine in Alaska, a massive proposed gold and copper mining project near Bristol Bay, a key watershed for sockeye salmon.

After the Army Corps of Engineers gave a green light to the project last month, a handful of conservative figures, notably Donald Trump Jr., conservative newscaster Tucker Carlson and Nick Ayers, a former adviser to Vice President Mike Pence, came out against it.

On Monday, the Corps said it would delay issuing its final decision on the project.

"That's very, very heartening for us," Shirley said of the younger Trump's opposition to Pebble. "We've been devising ways to get this issue in front of Don Jr." The comparisons between Pebble and Tongass are apt, Shirley said. "It's heavy industrialization that will ruin a pristine part of Alaska."

A White House spokesman declined to comment. A Forest Service spokeswoman said the proposed rule is under consideration at the White House budget office.

Both Sen. Dan Sullivan, R-Alaska, and Rep. Don Young, R-Alaska, who has represented the state since the 1970s, are up for reelection. Both men drew viable challengers, and Inside Elections with Nathan L. Gonzales rates their races as "likely" Republican. The president carried the state, which is notoriously difficult to poll, by 14.7 percentage points.

Americans historically rank the environment significantly lower in their priorities than health care, the economy and education, and the divide splits the parties.

While Shirley said Republicans have lagged Democrats on the environment and said the president has been nonexistent on the issue—"He hasn't talked about it at all, let's face it," he said—Republicans don't care about the environment or climate nearly as much as left-leaning voters. Just 8% of Republicans view climate change as "extremely important," versus 44% of Democrats, according to a Gallup poll from December.

"Like it or not, the Democrats have done a better job of communicating their concerns for the environment than Republicans," Shirley said. "It

seems to me that Tongass is just the lowest of low-hanging fruit."

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Citation: In Alaska forest, Reagan biographer sees a winning GOP strategy (2020, August 27)
retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-08-alaska-forest-reagan-biographer-gop.html>

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