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## For Immediate Release

### Media Contacts:

Paula Dobbyn, Alaska Communications Director, Trout Unlimited, [pdobbyn@tu.org](mailto:pdobbyn@tu.org) or 907-230-1513

Mark Kaelke, Southeast Alaska Project Director, Trout Unlimited, [mkaelke@tu.org](mailto:mkaelke@tu.org) or 907-321-4464

Andrew Thoms, Executive Director, Sitka Conservation Society, [Andrew@sitkawild.org](mailto:Andrew@sitkawild.org) or 907-747-7509

## **TROUT UNLIMITED, SITKA CONSERVATION SOCIETY, AND GOVERNMENT AGENCIES PARTNER TO RESTORE SALMON RIVER IN ALASKA'S TONGASS NATIONAL FOREST**

### ***Damaged by Logging, Sitkoh River to Receive \$290,000 Rehab Next Summer***

(Juneau, Alaska) – In a unique public-private partnership, a group of government and non-government agencies in the Tongass National Forest is working together to restore the Sitkoh River, one of Southeast Alaska's prime coho salmon and steelhead producers that also hosts significant numbers of pink salmon. Poor logging practices from the past damaged valuable spawning and rearing habitat along the river, located some 70 miles from the community of Sitka near the confluence of Peril and Chatham Straits.

Recognizing how important the Sitkoh River is to commercial, sport and subsistence fishermen, the group decided to partner on a large-scale rehabilitation project to begin next summer. With \$140,000 from the U.S. Forest Service, \$108,000 in sustainable

salmon funding from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, \$25,000 provided by Trout Unlimited (TU) and a \$15,000 in-kind contribution from the Sitka Conservation Society (SCS,) the group has committed to carrying out a multi-year project to rehabilitate the Sitkoh and restore it to near-original condition.

“We all recognize that salmon are a key driver of Southeast Alaska’s economy and, just as important, these fish are woven tightly in our cultural and social fabric. Restoring salmon habitat, as this project will do, often takes a collaborative force and we’re glad to be part of this effort,” said ADF&G habitat biologist Kyle Moselle.

The first phase of the project, to be completed during the summer of 2011, will focus on restoring 1,800 feet of critical salmon rearing habitat. This section flows down an old logging road, meandering through former clear-cuts devoid of the towering spruce and hemlock old growth trees for which Southeast Alaska is famous. Such trees provide the shade, nutrients and large woody debris that salmon and steelhead need to reproduce. If left as is, the river will continue to widen and erode its banks near the logging road, block fish passage, increase fish mortality and further degrade downstream habitat. Restoration efforts will focus on constructing small pools in which the fish can spawn and rear, restoring hydrologic function and preventing the river from flowing back into the old logging road. Engineered log jams and large woody debris will be placed in segments of the river to improve salmon spawning gravels, create pool habitat and help reduce erosion/sedimentation and stabilize stream banks.

Phase two of the project will recreate natural spawning conditions in a downstream section of the river that is also damaged, and the final phase will focus on thinning second-growth stands along the river and in upland areas to improve conditions for deer, an important subsistence food for local residents. The work will likely extend into 2012.

The business community strongly supports the project, particularly leaders in Sitka, the closest community to the Sitkoh River whose economy strongly depends on healthy populations of wild salmon.

“To maintain our commercial fisheries and support the needs of subsistence harvesters, healthy salmon spawning streams and rivers are vital. We support the Sitkoh River restoration project and wish to see more of it in Southeast Alaska,” said Garry White, executive director of the Sitka Economic Development Association.

Timber harvesting methods have improved over time yet it was once common to yard logs by dragging them down salmon rivers, and clear-cutting to the banks without leaving any tree buffer zones. Both practices degraded salmon habitat and are now illegal. In another move that bodes well for fish, the Forest Service recently announced plans to shift focus from logging old-growth trees in the Tongass National Forest to offering timber sales in second-growth stands, a much more conservation-minded approach to land management.

“We applaud the Forest Service for not only engaging in the Sitkoh River restoration project but for showing leadership and vision when it comes to managing the highest

salmon producing region in our country's national forest system," said Mark Kaelke, Trout Unlimited's Southeast Alaska Project Manager.

The Forest Service official overseeing the project for the agency said he's pleased to be working cooperatively with other groups who care about fish. In the past, such cooperation was often sorely lacking.

"One of the things that impresses me most about this project is that instead of us and them fighting with lawyers and spending our money on litigation, we're focusing on the things that are important to us, namely enhancing fish habitat, and both sides are bringing money to the table to pay that. It's very encouraging," said biologist Perry Edwards, ecosystems staffer with the Sitka Ranger District.

As the Forest Service transitions to its new land management focus, some Southeast Alaska residents urge the federal agency to direct more of its attention and budget resource to salmon restoration projects, like Sitkoh, in the months and years ahead.

"Given how important salmon are to the regional economy, we need to support research, management and habitat restoration to keep our fisheries healthy and productive. The money and attention that the Forest Service historically has devoted to timber harvest should be redirected to conserving wild salmon," said Craig Shoemaker, who heads Alaska operations for Seafood Producers Cooperative.

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To view the project area, take a Google Earth tour at:

<https://sites.google.com/a/sitkawild.org/sitka-stewardship/google-earth-tour>

For JPG images, contact Paula Dobbyn at [pdobbyn@tu.org](mailto:pdobbyn@tu.org) or 907-230-1513.