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Date: December 22, 2006

Dear Planning Participant:

This letter accompanies a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and Draft Proposed Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) we have prepared for your review, consideration and comment. The current Tongass Forest Plan was revised in 1997 and was intensively reviewed in 2005 (5 Year Review), which identified a suite of opportunities to update or improve the Plan. Since 1997 the Forest Service has been responding to a variety of appeals (33) and litigation on the processes that were used to create the 1997 Plan. This Draft EIS responds primarily to a recent decision issued by the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals. Opportunities identified in the 5 Year Review deemed ripe for consideration at this time have also been included in the draft documents.

In August 2005, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit issued a decision in *Natural Resources Defense Council, et al., v. United States Forest Service, et al.*, 421 F.3d 797 (9th Cir. 2005) that found deficiencies in the process used to develop the 1997 Forest Plan revision. Specifically, the Court found inadequacies related to timber demand, the range of alternatives considered relative to timber demand and potential effects on roadless areas, and cumulative effects from activities conducted on non-National Forest System lands. The Court ordered additional analysis and the development of an EIS to correct these deficiencies.

The draft documents being released today for public comment address all of the deficiencies identified by the Court, as well as a number of opportunities identified by the 5 Year Review of the Forest Plan. We anticipate the review and finalization of these documents to result in an amendment to the current Forest Plan.

In response to the Court's direction, the Tongass National Forest has worked with the Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Research Station to update or estimate the market demand for timber from the Tongass over the next two decades. *Timber Products Output and Timber Harvest in Alaska: Projections for 2005-2025*, identifies four scenarios which follow a progressive development of the timber industry in Southeast Alaska toward the potential planning cycle or long-term demand level.

- Scenario 1 – Limited Lumber Production – Current Situation
- Scenario 2 – Expanded Lumber Production
- Scenario 3 – Medium Integrated Industry
- Scenario 4 – High Integrated Industry

We do not know which timber demand scenario will come to pass so the Draft EIS evaluates a full range of alternatives that encompasses all of these demand scenarios in a variety of ways. In



particular, the alternatives display potential effects on inventoried roadless areas, as well as all other forest resources of the Tongass National Forest.

To better address cumulative effects, the Forest Service has gathered resource information from the other landowners who conduct commercial timber harvest activities, including the State of Alaska and Alaska Native Corporations. Consequently, the Draft EIS paints a broader, more comprehensive picture of what is happening in Southeast Alaska on Federal, State, and private lands, and of the effects of past timber harvest activities on all ownerships.

I have chosen not to identify a preferred alternative in this Draft EIS because I hope that your input can help us make a more informed choice. There are a number of factors I must carefully consider to find a balance among the many competing needs and desires for Tongass resources that affect how we apply our stewardship mandate.

For example, the Conservation Strategy included in the 1997 Forest Plan has been integral to maintaining biological diversity and species viability. Our challenge, and another area where we need your assistance, is how best to incorporate the Conservation Strategy into a selected alternative that also supports community economic viability, through a more integrated timber industry, without impacting other uses.

In addition, the Tongass Timber Reform Act of 1990 requires the Tongass National Forest to seek to provide a supply of timber to meet annual and planning cycle timber demand, consistent with multiple use and sustained yield of all renewable forest resources. The short term (or annual) demand for timber is calculated each year. The longer term demand for timber (or planning cycle demand) is a significant component of the Tongass Forest Plan that looks out 15 years or more. Several independent demand analyses, as well as the Pacific Northwest Research Station's 2005 report, have indicated the potential planning cycle demand could be approximately 360 MMBF per year.

A number of thoughts come to mind when looking at the various alternatives we considered. For example, Alternative 6 updates the Forest Plan relative to the 5 Year Review, but may not provide a large enough land base, suitable for timber harvest, to achieve a more integrated timber industry. An integrated timber industry is expected to process all products from the forest in a cost- and value-effective manner. Alternative 4 offers an opportunity to accommodate a more integrated timber industry while balancing other resource effects, thus assisting the communities with economic development and enhancing the industry's competitive position in world markets.

I would like an available land base large enough to meet timber demand if it materializes. This could allow timber demand to progress over time from a relatively stable source of timber supply as the industry elects to make infrastructure investments. At the same time, it makes sense to think about designing an implementation strategy that focuses timber harvest primarily in the roaded land base, with expansion into more sensitive areas only if demand increases.

And this is where you can truly help us. We are providing a variety of options for you to comment on and participate in the finalization of the draft documents. We have developed a comprehensive web site at www.tongass-fpadjust.net that includes much information on the background of forest planning on the Tongass, a variety of products developed in support of this

project, access to a significant number of reference documents, easy access to other associated web sites, and a user-friendly public comment section.

We strongly encourage you to provide your comments to us at the web site. This will increase our efficiency in thoroughly analyzing and processing your comments. We also encourage organizations or groups of commenters to provide bulk comments in electronic format such as on a CD.

A large number of public meetings and hearings are being scheduled throughout Southeast Alaska during the 90-day comment period. The basic format of these events will be an open house display of project related information and discussions followed by a formal hearing where individuals can provide testimony on subsistence or other Forest Plan related subjects. A web-based public meeting and hearing which mirrors the community events will be offered on the internet later in the comment period as well. The locations and schedule of public meetings/hearings can be found at the website.

Publication of the Notice of Availability of the Draft EIS in the Federal Register begins a 90-day public comment period. The closing date of the comment period will also be posted on the project web site. Comments on the Draft EIS are most helpful if they are specific and address the adequacy of the Draft EIS and the merits of the alternatives discussed.

The final decision will be subject to appeal under regulations found at 36 CFR 217.6 (revised as of July 1, 1998, and available on the internet at www.fs.fed.us/emc/applit/appeals.htm).

If you need additional information or if you would like additional copies of this Draft EIS, please contact Lee Kramer, the Project Manager at 907-586-8811, ext. 225.

Sincerely,



FORREST COLE
Forest Supervisor