



Tongass National Forest Land Management Plan Amendment

Background

The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals decision, (*NRDC v. USFS*, No. 04-35868) August 5, 2005, found inadequacies in the NEPA process for the 1997 Tongass National Forest Land Management Plan (often called “TLMP” or the Tongass Forest Plan). These inadequacies related to timber demand, the range of alternatives regarding timber demand, and cumulative effects from disproportionate harvest of high-volume timber on non-National Forest System lands. The Court ordered further analysis and completion of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to correct these inadequacies. The 5-Year Plan Review completed in 2005 also identified other topics that could be updated if the Forest Plan was amended.

A Notice of Intent to amend the Forest Plan was published in the Federal Register in March 2006. This amendment follows the provisions of the 1982 planning rule. The Notice of Availability of the Proposed Amended Plan and Draft EIS was published in the Federal Register January 12, 2007 and began a public comment period. The comment period was extended to March 30, 2007, for a total of 108 days. The Record of decision was signed January 23, 2008.

The Planning Area

The 16.8-million acre Tongass National Forest is located in Southeast Alaska, the area commonly called the panhandle. It is bordered on the east by Canada and on the west by the Gulf of Alaska. The Forest extends approximately 500 miles north to south, and approximately 120 miles east to west at its widest point. The Tongass includes a narrow mainland strip of steep, rugged mountains and ice fields, and more than 1,000 offshore islands known as the Alexander Archipelago. Together, the islands and mainland have nearly 11,000 miles of meandering shoreline, with numerous bays and coves. A system of seaways separates the many islands and provides a protected waterway called the Inside Passage. Federal lands comprise about 90 percent of Southeast Alaska, with about 80 percent in the Tongass National Forest (and most of the rest in Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve). The remaining land is held in State, Native Corporations, and other private ownerships.

Most of the area of the Tongass is wild and undeveloped. Approximately 73,000 people inhabit Southeast Alaska, most living in 32 communities. Only eight of the communities have populations greater than 1,000 persons. Only three towns are connected to the “outside” by roads. Most of these communities are surrounded by, or adjacent to, National Forest System land.

The economies of Southeast Alaska’s communities rely on the Tongass National Forest to provide natural resources for uses such as fishing, timber harvesting, recreation, tourism, mining, and subsistence. Maintaining the abundant natural resources of the Forest, while also providing opportunities for their use, is a major concern of Southeast Alaska residents.

Key Areas of Interest

Timber Demand

The Tongass Timber Reform Act directs the Forest Service to “seek to meet” market demand for timber from the Tongass, both the annual demand and demand for each planning cycle, subject to other applicable law and to the extent consistent with providing for the multiple use and sustained yield of all renewable forest resources. The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals found that the

Forest Service had used an incorrect interpretation of timber demand projections in the 1997 planning process and directed that a new analysis be done.

The timber industry in Southeast Alaska continues to be in transition. Lack of a stable wood supply, due in part to litigation, has contributed to relatively low investment by the industry. Demand for Southeast Alaskan wood products depends upon changing technology, changes in consumer tastes and preferences, and developments in other producing regions whose products compete with those of Alaska. The capacity and efficiency of Southeast Alaska mills, coupled with the availability and cost of raw materials, significantly influences the ability of local producers to compete in global markets.

In 1990, the Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Research Station (PNW) established "planning cycle" projections of Alaska timber products output, the derived demand for logs and chips, and timber harvest by owner through trend-based analysis. This analysis was updated in 1994, 1997 and again in 2006. The 2006 projections, *Timber Products Output and Timber Harvest in Alaska: Projections for 2005-2025* modified the low, medium and high calculations of the previous documents into four scenarios that essentially make projections for the current underutilized mill capacity situation;

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

The Forest Plan Amendment EIS evaluates a range of alternatives that fully encompasses these demand scenarios. In addition, the Forest Service added an alternative that exceeds the highest demand scenario to respond to a request from Southeast Conference, a group of business and community leaders. The amount of timber volume estimated to be economic under typical market conditions under the amended Forest Plan closely matches the long-run demand estimated by PNW under Scenario 2, which the PNW economists believe is the most likely scenario to develop over the next 15-20 years.

While the current timber program is still heavily dependant on the harvest of old growth timber, young growth has the potential to begin contributing volume to satisfy timber demand. For example, the commercial thinning of second growth could greatly improve habitat for deer, a species important to subsistence users, while providing a marketable product that could include high value house logs. The amended Forest Plan accommodates these opportunities.

Timber Operability

The economics of the Tongass timber sale program continues to be a national issue. This amendment updates estimates of the operability of forest land available for timber management and updates information about logging systems, yields, costs, revenues and the impacts of Standards and Guidelines.

The integrated operability analysis, along with updated costs, revenues, yields, GIS information and Land Use Designations, are used in the Spectrum model to calculate an Allowable Sale Quantity (ASQ) for each alternative. The annual average ASQ for the amended Forest Plan is 267 million board feet, which is the same as the ASQ for the 1997 Plan.

Community Health and Stability

Many communities in Southeast Alaska are heavily dependant on National Forest timber

supplies for their economic well-being. Limited timber supplies over the past few years have contributed to a decline in timber-based jobs, economic activity and even population. Prompt resolution of the Court-identified inadequacies is a critical step in reestablishing timber supplies to local mills. The potential socioeconomic impacts to communities in Southeast Alaska were an important factor in the Regional Forester's decision to approve the amended Forest Plan.

Roadless Areas and the Timber Sale Program Adaptive Management Strategy

The Tongass National Forest contains approximately 16.8 million acres, of which about 6.6 million acres are Congressionally designated wilderness, National Monument, or LUD II lands. There are 109 inventoried roadless areas which total approximately 9.5 million acres. Because of the roadless nature of the Forest, a large part of the current timber sale program is dependant upon entry into roadless areas. The alternatives analyzed in the Draft EIS depict different levels of dependence on roadless area timber harvest to meet various levels of potential demand.

As part of the decision on the Forest Plan, the Regional Forester also approved the Timber Sale Program Adaptive Management Strategy, under which the timber program will be implemented in three phases, depending on actual timber harvest levels. Under Phase 1, the timber program will be generally be limited to a portion of the suitable land base that excludes moderate and higher value roadless areas. This Phase 1 portion includes approximately 537,000 suitable acres, or 69 percent of the total suitable land base. Should the actual level of timber harvest reach 100 MMBF for two consecutive fiscal years, the Tongass could then plan for timber projects in the Phase 2 portion of the approved suitable land base, resulting in a program that operates on 680,000 acres of suitable land, including some moderate value roadless areas. Should timber harvest reach 150 MMBF for two consecutive fiscal years, the Tongass could then plan for timber projects in Phase 3, which includes the entire suitable land base. The Adaptive Management Strategy is an additional step being taken in response to concerns than an overestimate of timber demand will lead to timber harvest in areas perceived by many as more environmentally sensitive—such as higher value roadless areas—that would not have to be developed if the Plan were based on a lower estimate of timber demand.

Cumulative Effects

Resource information has been obtained from the State of Alaska and Native Corporation landholders as well as satellite imagery on other private lands. The EIS paints a broader, more comprehensive picture of what is happening in SE Alaska on Federal, State and private lands, including a catalog of past timber harvest on non-federal lands.

Conservation Strategy

The 1997 Forest Plan established a comprehensive, science-based conservation strategy to address wildlife sustainability and viability. This strategy included a network of interconnected, variably sized, old-growth reserves across the Forest. This coarse filter approach was designed to maintain a functional and interconnected old-growth ecosystem, which in turn will maintain the component parts (composition and structure) and processes (function) of that ecosystem.

At a finer level, species-specific forest management standards and guidelines were developed for those vertebrates that needed additional protection measures to ensure their viability and well-distributed status. It is the integration of all of these components that makes the conservation strategy fully functional.

This strategy was based on careful analysis and integration of the best scientific information available at that time. The analysis for this Forest Plan Amendment included an interagency effort to examine pertinent new information accumulated since 1997 and identify what additional information may be needed to better understand the strategy's effectiveness.

The amended Forest Plan retains all key components of the 1997 Conservation Strategy, while reducing the adverse economic effects of two of the 1997 Plan's standards and guidelines. The amended Forest Plan will provide sufficient fish and wildlife habitat to maintain viable populations of vertebrate species on the Tongass, as required by the 1982 planning regulations, even if timber is harvested every year for 100 years at the maximum rate allowed by the Forest Plan.

Continuing Related Issues

Alaska Native land claim settlements will play a role in determining the future land base of the Tongass National Forest, as Sealaska alone has more than 60,000 acres of unfulfilled entitlements. Village corporations can be expected to seek to trade out of previously harvested lands and into land that can continue to produce income.

Maturing second growth, coupled with a need to restore some previously-harvested watersheds, provides a potential basis for building a "restoration economy" in parts of southeast Alaska. Private firms from the Lower 48 are already investing in sales providing products suitable for the house log industry.

Collaborative Efforts

A Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare an EIS was published in the Federal Register on March 28, 2006, to officially notify the public of the project. Other public notification and involvement methods include news releases, mailings and public briefings (including briefings of elected officials, tribal governments, agencies and other groups). Public open houses, as well as ANILCA hearings, were held in 26 communities during the comment period. An internet meeting was also held to reach the broadest possible audience. Over 85,000 comments were received.

In order to reach as many individuals and groups as possible the Forest is taking a web-based approach to communication with interested stakeholders. The Forest Plan Amendment Web site <http://www.tongass-fpadjust.net/> went on-line in January 2006. This site includes a variety of information about the Forest Plan Amendment.

The Tongass Futures Roundtable, a stakeholder's group convened by the Nature Conservancy, the National Forest Foundation and several non-profit foundations, promises to play a significant role in the future. Members of this group represent the significant stakeholder groups in Southeast Alaska, and are engaging in a long-term dialog aimed at finding common ground on a number of thorny issues in the region.

The State of Alaska participated as a cooperating agency in all phases of the planning process for amending the Tongass Land Management Plan (Forest Plan). The Forest Service and the State will continue this close working relationship to promote effective and coordinated implementation of the Plan. In the Record of Decision for the Forest Plan Amendment, the Regional Forester directed the Forest Supervisor to develop a comprehensive cost-sharing agreement with the State of Alaska regarding implementation of the amended Forest Plan within six months. The agreement will outline the roles and responsibilities of the Forest Service and the State, focusing on implementation of the Plan, monitoring and evaluation, and making changes in response to new information.

Next Steps

- February 2008 - The Notice of Availability of the Final EIS will be published in the *Federal Register*.
- February 2008 - Legal notice of the decision will be published in the *Juneau Empire* and the *Anchorage Daily News*.
- March 2008 – The amended Forest Plan is effective 30 days after the Notice of Availability of the Final EIS is published in the *Federal Register*, or 7 calendar days following publication of the legal notice of the decision, whichever is later.
- February-May 2008 – Appeals of the decision must be filed with the Chief of the Forest Service within 90 days of the publication of the legal notice.

More Information

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