

# Amended Tongass plan out

By MATT ARMSTRONG

Daily News Staff Writer

This week marked a potentially significant date in the planned transition of the U.S. Forest Service-managed Tongass National Forest.

Forest Supervisor Earl Stewart announced Thursday morning the release of the amended forest plan for the Tongass National Forest, and the related final environmental impact statement and draft record of decision.

The draft decision was based on the Tongass Advisory Committee's December recommendation to the Forest Service about how to best transition to young-growth timber, according to Stewart.

The TAC was a federally appointed committee that included representatives of the timber industry, environmental and conservation groups, and other stakeholders. The committee was tasked with recommending to the Forest Service how to comply with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's mandate that the Tongass transition to young-growth timber.

"(The proposed action) focuses on accelerating the transition from old-growth timber harvest to young-growth, maintaining a viable timber industry, and promoting more sustainable and diverse local economies through promoting renewable energy," Stewart said in Thursday morning conference call. "... The draft decision comes at the end of a very comprehensive public involvement process that sought to carefully consider input from the public, local, state and federal agencies, (and) federally recognized tribes, and is strengthened by previous decades of cooperative efforts."

The Forest Service published the draft EIS in November and received more than 165,000 formal comments. Excluding form letters, the Forest Service received about 1,350 "substantive comments," which it sought to address before publication of the documents released Thursday, according to Stewart.

While the initial request from U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack was to complete the transition within 10 to 15 years, the proposed amendment to the forest plan calls for a 16-year transition period, Stewart said in a phone interview Thursday afternoon.

"It's a little bit fluid, because there is flexibility built into it," Stewart said, adding that there was a host of different reasons for choosing the 16-year transition period.

"I think one of the primary reasons was to try to maintain a viable industry, and the industry viability has to do with operability and marketability of forest products," Stewart said. "And then also the opportunity to determine on the managing side how you would re-tool or operate in the future."

The proposed amendment also would have the Forest Service try to make available as much as 46 million board feet per year, with higher percentages of old-growth timber early on in the transition that would decrease over time, according to Stewart.

“By year 16, it’s predominantly young-growth, with a 5 million board feet component of old-growth for those niche markets,” Stewart said.

The Forest Service uses a five-year plan to determine what timber sales it might offer in an attempt to meet the 46 million board feet per year goal.

While potential litigation can derail proposed timber sales — just as proposed federal legislation could delay the transition process — the Forest Service will move ahead with its operations until there is litigation or approved legislation, Stewart said.

“Recognizing litigation is completely outside of our control at this point in time and a process, we really have to let that process go independent (of what we do),” Stewart said. “It’s pretty much an independent action as to any litigious issue. As to legislative issues, anything that actually is passed into law we actually follow immediately if by law directed.”

Going forward, there will be a 60-day filing period for objections to the amended plan and draft ROD starting Saturday, as well as a concurrent 30-day public review period for the final EIS. Following the 60-day objection period, Regional Forester Beth Pendleton will have 90 days to respond to objections, according to Stewart.

The final ROD and amended plan are targeted for publication in December, and publication of the final decision would start the 16-year transition to young-growth timber, Stewart said.

## Backlash

Thursday’s announcement was met with criticism from both the timber industry and environmental and conservation groups.

Owen Graham, executive director of the Alaska Forest Association, said in a phone interview Thursday afternoon that the timber industry is certain the transition won’t work in terms of having manufacturing in Southeast Alaska.

“How quickly the manufacturing disappears depends on how quickly they stop providing mature timber,” Graham said, adding that too much of what’s planned for harvest will be sent to China for processing and manufacturing.

“We’re really frustrated about it,” Graham said.

Several completed and in-progress inventories and studies of young-growth timber in the Tongass have either showed — or are likely to show — that the transition won’t work, according to Graham.

“They want to get this (ROD) signed because it’s all about the politics,” Graham said. “It’s not about the forest, and it’s not about anything other than just political shenanigans. ... People in Washington, D.C., could care less about what happens in Alaska.”

Graham added that the industry needs a steady timber supply to be a viable industry.

Several organizations criticized the proposed amendment through news releases sent out throughout the day Thursday.

Statements read in part:

- Dominick DellaSala, chief scientist of the Oregon-based Geos Institute's Forest Legacy Program: "On the heels of news last March that global carbon dioxide levels exceeded the 400 parts per million mark, old-growth forests on the Tongass, the nation's most carbon dense forest, are being clearcut. The Tongass absorbs about 8 percent of the nation's carbon dioxide pollution annually — far greater than any other national forest.

"The Forest Service has become a rogue agency ignoring the (Obama) administration's own climate change policies at the expense of one of the world's most expansive and carbon-dense temperate rainforests."

- Kristen Miller, conservation director at Alaska Wilderness League: "We are disappointed that today's plan does not do more to rapidly end the unsustainable old-growth logging practices of the past that threaten the intact ecosystems of the Tongass.

"However, the Forest Service has made some important steps forward with this plan. We appreciate that the agency has recognized the importance of conservation in the Tongass by specifying places like high-value salmon watersheds, inventoried roadless areas, and other conservation lands where valuable resources exist as areas where logging should not be allowed to occur. The beauty and wildlife of the Tongass have made tourism and recreation a central piece of southeast Alaska's economy, and the high-value watersheds represent some of the best salmon habitat in the Tongass and are critical to the region's booming fishing industry.

"... Unfortunately, Alaska's representatives in Congress predictably continue to champion a narrow set of special interests instead of doing what's best for Southeast Alaskans. They continue to live in the past instead of doing what's best for the region's future. Delaying the transition away from old-growth logging will come at the expense of growing and sustainable industries; the abundant wild salmon, scenery and wildlife that are the backbone of the region's economy; and a locally-driven public process that has brought us to the doorstep of a new era for the Tongass."

- Susan Culliney, Audubon Alaska's policy associate: "A slow but steady degradation problem has plagued the Tongass and its endemic wildlife for decades. Over time, seemingly separate logging activities have merged into what amounts to death by a thousand cuts. It's time to conserve the remaining big trees for wildlife and sustainable practices."

- Melanie Smith, Audubon Alaska's director of conservation science: "The FEIS's planned entry into sensitive beach fringe and riparian habitat will clearcut the very areas the agency once set aside for wildlife. Furthermore, allowing old-growth clearcutting and the associated road-building to continue on the Tongass exacerbates the already troubled wolf and deer populations on Prince of Wales Island."

- Holly Harris, attorney for Washington, D.C., based Earthjustice: "Instead of making the promised rapid transition out of old-growth logging, the Forest Service's proposed plan perpetuates the conflict and controversy of clear-cutting Tongass old-growth forests for at least

another 15 years and possibly much longer, destroying the very same forests that support our world-class fishing, hunting, tourism and recreation industries.

“ ... This plan also costs our country tens of millions of dollars every year unsustainable old-growth logging continues. The Forest Service is forcing taxpayers to write the check to subsidize an industry that can't survive on its own.

“Southeast Alaska has moved on to a sustainable environmental and economic paradigm and it is long past time for the Forest Service to catch up. The Tongass Land Management Plan needs to end the devastation of unsustainable old-growth logging.”

- Austin Williams, Trout Unlimited: “This plan amendment has the support of thousands of Alaskans that understand it's far past time we move beyond the conflict and controversy of timber management on the Tongass and recognize the great value our largest national forest provides for fishing and tourism. This is a huge step in the right direction for sustainable and economically sensible management of the Tongass. Having come so far, we encourage Congress and our own Senator (Lisa) Murkowski (R-Alaska) to not stand in the way of this plan amendment. Pushing legislation that threatens to turn back the clock and open the door to more litigation just increases uncertainty for everyone involved.”

Additional information on the amendment, final EIS and draft ROD is available online at: [www.fs.usda.gov/tongass](http://www.fs.usda.gov/tongass).