

Mining in Alaska's National Forests

Since the acquisition of Alaska from Russia in 1867, prospectors and miners have flooded north to seek their fortune, and most came through Southeast Alaska in their quest. Over the next 100 years or so, mining activities waxed and waned with the prevailing territorial and early statehood economic and political environments. But for the last 30 years, significant increases in commodity prices as well as the development of modern transportation and mining technologies to prospect and explore for, and extract mineral resources have fueled renewed interest.

The 17-million acre Tongass National Forest is endowed with tremendous potential for the development of base (copper, lead, zinc) and precious (silver, gold, and platinum) metal mines. Today the Tongass administers the only two large mining operations (250+ employees) in Southeast Alaska, both based out of Juneau. The Kensington gold mine is on the Berners Peninsula about 45 miles northwest of Juneau, and the Greens Creek Mine (silver, zinc, lead & gold) is on Admiralty Island about 25 miles to the southwest. Several other mineral properties are in various stages of exploration throughout the Tongass.

The 5.6-million acre Chugach National Forest is endowed with the potential for the development of both lode and placer deposits. Placer gold mining has been of interest on the Chugach since the Russian Era (1848), when they prospected the Kenai Peninsula for the yellow metal. What they found was obviously not enough to keep them from selling Alaska to the Americans in 1867. But, 40 years later in the late 1880's, gold was discovered on Resurrection Creek, and the rush was on! Many miners from the Cassiar and Klondike gold strikes were in the area and all the gold-bearing creeks on the Kenai were quickly claimed. Over the years, pick and shovel placer mining using simple wooden sluice boxes gave way to more efficient hydraulic methods, and by the 1920's the profitable deposits were cleaned out. While most of the placer resource has been mined out, the Chugach still has the potential for small-scale placer gold mining, particularly through use of small suction dredges. The placer deposits led to the discovery of significant lode deposits of base (copper, lead, & zinc) and precious (gold & silver) metals, which were mined from large operations on several locations on the forest (1904 on Latouche Island through the late 1930's). Wars, commodity prices, and economics (more easily mined deposits in the western US and overseas) closed the lode mines of Prince William Sound, but considerable potential exists for future reevaluations.

The Chugach National Forest also has great potential for the development of common variety or salable minerals (sand & gravel, shot rock, rip-rap, building stone, etc.). Growth and sprawl of the greater Anchorage bowl area is creating great demand for such resources and the forest has some strategically located reserves - most notably, the Portage Valley on the Seward Highway, and the Spencer Glacier outwash plain along the Alaska Railroad.