Leader's Intent: Forest Stewardship and Young Growth Management on the Tongass National Forest

Introduction

In 2010, the Forest Service initiated a process to transition the timber program on the Tongass National Forest to young growth management. However, questions persist about what the transition means, why we are doing it, how we plan to accomplish it, and how it fits in with other programs.

As Forest Service leadership with responsibilities for managing the Tongass, we prepared this paper to **clarify our intent for the transition to young growth in Southeast Alaska**.

This intent fits into the broader goal of supporting sustainable communities through economic diversification as laid out in the Transition Framework, and is a key element of our long-term, integrated program of work that encompasses restoration, collaboration, and forest stewardship to support ecological, community, and economic health. **Enduring change will require addressing the fundamental resource challenge in the region** – transitioning to a new, young growth-based forest products industry. Our success will be dependent upon engagement by, and support from, partners across the region.

Rationale

At nearly 17 million acres, the Tongass National Forest is one of the world's largest remaining intact coastal rainforests, providing significant ecosystem values including clean water, carbon storage, intact wildlife corridors, and world-class salmon habitat. Timber has played a significant economic and cultural role on the Tongass for generations, and will continue to do so. Yet ecological, social and economic considerations, and longstanding conflict over large scale clearcutting of old growth forests, necessitate a shift to forest management that conserves the forest's rich resources while supporting vibrant economies and local communities. **We must also recognize that as societal values have shifted, so have policy directives**.

Significant changes in timber markets further require a re-evaluation of the role Alaska timber plays on the global stage. Either we embrace these changes while helping the timber industry be more competitive and scaled more appropriately to existing economic and social realities, or risk losing an industry altogether.

The Transition to Young Growth

Going forward, we will support sustainable economic development that builds on the region's natural resource strengths and grows jobs in a variety of sectors. **It is within this context of economic diversification and adaptation to change that we must reconsider the future of forest management on the Tongass.**

The industry's long-term survival in Southeast Alaska requires a transition from a dependence on old growth timber to a program that is primarily supported by young growth. Retaining the existing industry is critical to this approach, therefore the transition to young growth will be managed at a pace that allows operators to adjust, adapt, and develop markets for new products. The duration and scale at which old growth harvest will be needed is unclear. Factors such as the role of State and private land in contributing wood supply to a viable industry; the availability of suitable young growth that is mature and economic to harvest; export and domestic processing policies; and fluctuations in domestic and world markets for forest products must be considered, are unpredictable, and will influence the timeframe for transition.

Notwithstanding these challenges, our long term goal is that the majority of active forest management on the Tongass will be comprised of ecological restoration, precommercial thinning, small and microsale old growth timber sales focused on niche markets, and young growth forest management. These projects would in turn supply local and regional wood products markets.

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Actions

To achieve our intent, we will take the following steps over the next decade:

- **Strategy development:** In 2013, collaboratively develop a clear, measurable, science-based, and viable strategy for transitioning to young growth forest management.
- **Business-friendly program of work**: Outline a consistent and achievable program of work to facilitate investment in new businesses, particularly in forest stewardship and young growth utilization.
- **Integration**: Increase the portion of projects planned as integrated forest management projects that include a variety of resource management activities in each project area and offer diverse employment opportunities.
- **Collaboration**: Expand collaborative projects and partnerships with Tribes, communities, businesses and nonprofit groups to increase technical assistance and promote shared priorities that support job creation through sustainable forest management.
- **Timber supply**: Provide a dependable and economically competitive supply of timber for domestic and export markets.
- **Young growth offerings**: Offer increasing annual volumes of young growth timber and gradually reduce old growth harvests, while meeting timber demand to support local mills and investments in re-tooling, depending on markets and demand.
- **Small mill support**: Emphasize micro-sales, small sales, and other activities that provide opportunities for the small old growth mills scattered throughout Southeast Alaska.
- **Project implementation**: Increase the use of stewardship contracting to foster collaboration, build capacity, and allow longer-term contracts.
- **Wood to energy**: Catalyze wood-to-energy opportunities by leveraging federal, state and private funds to stimulate regional market demand.
- **Young growth demand**: Promote the use of local young growth products in Forest Service projects.

Communities throughout Southeast Alaska face pressing social, economic, and environmental challenges. The Forest Service is committed to addressing these challenges by **supporting community and ecosystem health in Southeast Alaska while maintaining the region's globally important resources for future generations**. As we work to achieve the intent and goals outlined above, we are committed to measuring ecological and socioeconomic progress, evaluating results, and adapting and responding to changing circumstances.

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