



United States Department of Agriculture

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# Draft Scenic Resource Assessment

## Tongass National Forest Plan Revision



**Cover Photo:** View from Thorne Bay, Prince of Wales Island.



Forest  
Service

Alaska  
Region

Tongass  
National Forest

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# **Draft Scenery Resource Assessment Tongass National Forest Plan Revision**

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## Introduction

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The Tongass National Forest offers a wide variety of highly scenic settings for visitors to enjoy, from the spectacular mountain ranges and glaciers of the mainland to low-lying marine landscapes composed of intricate waterways, bays, and island groups. The Forest may be viewed from a variety of vantage points, including the communities of Southeast Alaska, the Alaska Marine Highway ferry route, cruise ship routes, existing road systems, popular small boat routes and anchorages, developed recreation sites and facilities, and hiking trails. Tourist-related flightseeing via small aircraft provides aerial views of the forest landscape (see Figure 1).

In one study, over half of visitors to Alaska (51%) cite scenic beauty as a reason for visiting the state, and over half of the state's visitors (56%) travel to Southeast Alaska in search of scenery available nowhere else (ATIA, 2023). During public engagement conducted by the Forest Service, Southeast Alaska residents have also cited the scenery provided by the Tongass as important to their recreational pursuits and sense of place, and for supporting economic development through tourism opportunities (SASS and Forest Plan Revision Public Meeting feedback).

While the 2012 Planning Rule dictates that the revised Forest Plan must address sustainability of scenic resources and must consider effects to scenic integrity and scenic character, it is not required that scenery is retained in all areas under all circumstances. It is one of the many resources that must be balanced for an integrated revised Forest Plan. Visitors to a multi-use National Forest should expect to see some evidence of multi-use activities. However, scenic values must weigh in the balance when deciding upon appropriate long-term management direction.

## Resource Importance

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Scenery is often integral to a community's sense of place and quality of life. The benefits of natural appearing scenery can be social, economic, and, when managed to perpetuate healthy resilient landscapes, contribute to ecological sustainability (Hill and Spencer, 2020). Scenery is also an important component of recreation settings and can influence visitors' recreation experiences. The Tongass National Forest receives over 2 million visits a year, with the majority arriving via cruise ship. While most users who use the Forest for activities such as hiking, hunting, and fishing, are residents, many cruise ship passengers view the Forest. Scenery is one of the outstanding features of the Tongass National Forest. Currently, nearly 90% of the Tongass National Forest is or appears to be unaltered or slightly altered, meeting Scenic Integrity Objectives (SIOs) ranging from Moderate to Very High. Approximately 88% is, or appears to be, entirely unaltered (High and Very High SIOs).

## Resource History and Current Management Direction

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Recreation has become a greater focus since the completion of the 1997 Forest Plan, due to the continuing increase in visitors and recreation as an economic driver in Southeast Alaska. The assumption made in this assessment is that the focus on scenic values has also increased, since much recreation on the Tongass focuses on viewing scenery. The importance of waterways as a transportation route means that viewsheds from waterways are equally important as community, road, and trail views, when evaluating the scenic integrity of the Tongass National Forest.

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Forest Service policy requires that the agency inventory and manage scenic resource values on all acres of Forest Service managed public lands. The 2012 Planning Rule requires that plans must provide for sustainable recreation, including recreation settings, opportunities, and access, and scenic character (36 CFR 219.8(b)(2)). It also requires that they consider aesthetic values, geologic features, scenery, and viewsheds (36 CFR 219.10 (a)(1)). Scenic character must be considered in all planning phases of forest Plan revision, including the assessment phase. Other laws, regulations and policies that can guide scenery management and inclusion in plan revision can be found in Hill and Spencer (2020), Appendix A.

The Planning Rule, directives, and scenery management system protocols emphasize the importance of public engagement in developing scenery analyses, developing important scenery viewing routes, points, and areas, and determining the cultural and social scenic values (Hill & Spencer, 2020 USDA Forest Service 2024).

For the 1997 Tongass Forest Plan, scenery was inventoried and analyzed using the Visual Management System (VMS). Around this same time, the Forest Service replaced the Visual Management System with the Scenery Management System (Agricultural Handbook 701, Landscape Aesthetics: A Handbook for Scenery Management, or SMS Handbook, USDA Forest Service 1995). The Scenery Management System was adopted by the Tongass during the 2008 Forest Plan Amendment and was carried forward in the 2016 Forest Plan Amendment.

Like the Visual Management System, the Scenery Management System provides a systematic approach for inventory, analysis, management, and monitoring scenery resources and ensure high-quality scenery for future generations. The Scenery Management System emphasizes the role of public, agency, Tribal, and other organization’s involvement throughout the inventory and planning process. The Scenery Management System is integrated with concepts and terminology of ecosystem management, and therefore provides for improved integration of aesthetics with other biological, physical, and social/cultural resources in the planning process (USDA Forest Service 1995).



Figure 1. Example of an unaltered landscape on the Tongass National Forest; Tracy Arm Fjord as viewed from aircraft.

Supplementing the Scenery Management System Handbook are the planning concepts detailed in Forest Service Manual 2310, Chapter 10 – ‘Sustainable Recreation Planning’.

The USFS Built Environment Image Guide also offers tools for managing the aesthetics of developed sites and facilities with a focus on maintaining regionally valued architectural styles and materials. Regionally valued aspects of the built environment are integral to Scenery Management System and contribute to a landscape’s sense of place (USDA Forest Service 2001).

Scenic Integrity is at the core of the Scenery Management System. Definitions of Scenic Integrity that are used throughout this assessment, in line with Forest Service Manual 2310.5 are:

**Table 1. Scenic Integrity Class definitions, from Forest Service Manual 2310.5.**

Scenic Integrity Class	Definition
Very High	The landscape is intact with only minor changes from the valued attributes described in the scenic character.
High	Management activities are unnoticed and the landscape appears unaltered.
Moderate	Management activities are noticeable but are subordinate to the scenic character. The landscape appears slightly altered.
Low	The landscape appears altered. Management activities are evident and sometimes dominate, but are designed to blend with surroundings by repeating form, line, color, and texture of attributes described in the scenic character.
Very Low	Used to describe landscapes that are heavily altered and in which the valued attributes described in the scenic character are not evident. Very Low is used only to describe the existing scenic integrity. It is NOT used as a Scenic Integrity Objective or desired condition.

An example of each scenic integrity class, as illustrated in the 2016 Tongass Forest Plan Amendment, is shown in Figure 2 below.

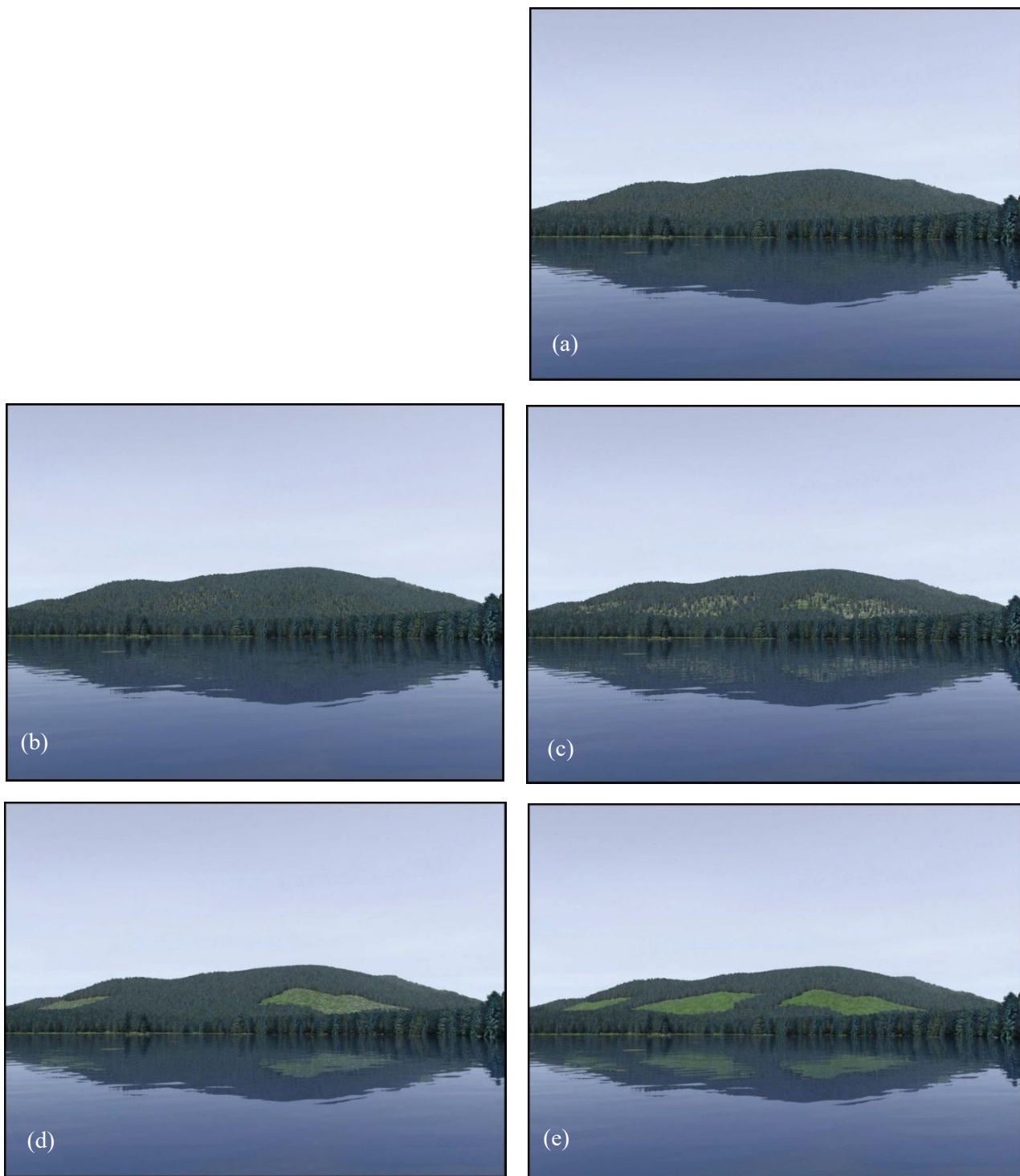


Figure 2. Photos showing illustrations of Scenic Integrity Objective classifications, as described in the 2016 Tongass National Forest Plan Amendment. (a) Undeveloped landscape, (b) High, (c) Moderate, (d) Low, (e) Very Low Scenic Integrity.

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## Current Management Direction

The 2016 land management plan amendment used the Scenery Management System to assign Scenic Integrity Objectives across the Forest. The existing Scenic Integrity Objectives are based on a combination of distance zones from visual priority routes and use areas, and by land use designations, creating a patchwork of Scenic Integrity Objectives. Visual priority routes and use areas are the major routes and points from which people view the forest. Some Land Use Designations (LUDs), such as Wilderness and Wild and Scenic River corridors, have almost entirely High/Very High Scenic Integrity Objectives. Others, such as Timber Production LUDs, almost always have Low Scenic Integrity Objectives, to account for the focus of that LUD.

The current plan includes multiple layers of scenery direction. The following summarizes the types of scenery direction in the 2016 Forest Plan Amendment:

- Forest-wide scenery standards and guidelines (Chapter 4), focused on management activities such as transportation, timber harvest, and facilities for each Scenic Integrity Objective classification. These apply across all land use designations (LUDs)
- Designation of a “scenic viewshed” land use designation (LUD) with associated goals, objectives, desired conditions, and standards and guidelines. These areas were designed to provide a sustained yield of timber and a mix of resource activities while minimizing the visibility of developments as seen from Visual Priority Travel Routes and Use Areas. Within these areas, Very Low Scenic Integrity Objectives are assigned to all areas not within the foreground, middleground, or background distance zones.
- Each LUD also has its own scenery standards and guidelines. These usually state the scenic integrity objectives for that LUD. They also include specific exceptions or considerations when siting recreation or administrative facilities or other infrastructure within that LUD.
- Appendix I includes scenic quality as a setting indicator for each Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) class. Each ROS class has standards and guidelines that prescribe scenic integrity objectives. However, these ROS-related scenic integrity objectives do not correspond with the current Scenic Integrity Objective GIS layer.
- While it does not provide direction, Appendix F lists the visual priority routes and use areas by Ranger District, describes the process used to identify them, and describes how the foreground, middleground, and background distance zones are defined and used in project-level design and analysis. This appendix helps clarify how Scenic Integrity Objectives are used in practice.

The current plan describes visual priority routes and priority use areas used to determine viewing distances for foreground (0 to 0.5 miles), middleground (0.5 to 5 miles) and background (5-15 miles). Areas beyond 15 miles from a Visual Priority Route or Use Area are considered seldom seen, as are areas not viewed from a Visual Priority Routes listed in Appendix F, even if viewed from a location not currently designated as a Visual Priority Route.

Visual Priority Routes and Use Area types listed in Appendix F include the following:

- Communities

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- Alaska Marine Highway ferry route
  - Cruise ship routes
  - Small Boat and Mid-Size Tour Boat Routes
  - Public Use Roads
  - State Marine parks
  - Recommended Wild, Scenic and Recreational Rivers
  - Saltwater Use Areas: includes bays, inlets, coves, islands, points
  - Boat Anchorages
  - Dispersed Recreation Areas
  - Forest Service Cabins
  - Developed Recreation Sites
  - Hiking Trails
  - Private or Public Resorts
  - National Wildlife Refuges



Flightseeing and other air travel routes are not considered or managed as VPRs in the current Forest Plan.

## Scope and Scale of Assessment

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This assessment focuses on what is known about:

- Existing scenic integrity,
- Expected trends in scenic integrity and factors that may affect scenic integrity,
- The direction in the current Forest Plan, how it has been implemented, and any known concerns with direction related to scenery.
- Known data gaps, changed conditions, and needs for updated information related to scenery.

Scenery resources will be discussed in the context of lands within the Tongass National Forest boundary, and in the broader landscape. Many of the viewsheds on the Tongass are viewed from travel routes, communities, or recreation areas that are not located within the National Forest boundaries. Because of that, any discussion of scenery considers an entire landscape perspective. Plan direction will only apply to lands within the boundary of the Tongass National Forest and will have no bearing on management of other lands, but this assessment will consider the broader landscape when discussing existing conditions.

## Status and Trends

### Current Scenery Resources Status

Currently, about 88% of the land comprising the Tongass National Forest is rated as having high or very high scenic integrity. In areas at those levels, there are no noticeable deviations from the valued landscape. While there could be some management in those areas, it is not noticeable to the observer. Table 2 shows the most recent available scenic integrity estimates for the Tongass National Forest. These numbers have not been updated since 2006, but are the most recent data we have that covers the entire Tongass National Forest.

Table 2. The 2006 estimated existing scenic integrity of the Tongass National Forest (percent). The table is based on the most recent complete data for existing scenic integrity.

	Very High/High (%)	Moderate (%)	Low (%)	Very Low (%)	Unacceptably Low (%)
Seen	26.5	1	2.5	4.2	0.1
Seldom seen	27.1	0.2	0.9	1.9	0.1
Wilderness	34.1	0.1	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>87.7%</b>	<b>1.3%</b>	<b>3.6%</b>	<b>6.1%</b>	<b>0.2%</b>

Note: Numbers are GIS estimates and are not exact. Columns and rows may not sum exactly due to rounding. Less than 2% of the Forest is unclassified. This table is the same as Table 3.16-1 of the 2016 Forest Plan Amendment EIS, which was based on 2006 inventory and mapping. While there have been some changes in scenic integrity since then, it is likely too small to change percentages. The existing scenic integrity has not yet been re-modeled for this Forest Plan Revision, and therefore this table is an estimate of existing scenic integrity.

Table 3 shows the existing Scenic Integrity Objectives for the entire Tongass National Forest. These are objectives, and are not necessarily the current condition on the ground. These were developed for the 2008 Forest Plan Amendment, and have had no Tongass-wide updates since then. Therefore, they need to be updated as part of this Forest Plan Revision.

Table 2 and Table 3 show that the estimated existing scenic integrity is higher than the objectives at the scale of the entire Tongass National Forest. Table 3 shows that the estimated existing scenic integrity is well within the scenic integrity objectives, on a Tongass-wide scale. This does not apply to every acre on the ground, and deviations may occur at smaller scales.

Table 3. Existing Scenic Integrity Objective – by percent the Tongass National Forest. These numbers are estimates and rounded to the nearest percent.

	High/Very High	Moderate	Low	Very Low
Seen	13%	12%	4%	6%
Seldom seen	14%	9%	1%	7%
Wilderness	35%	0%	0%	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>14%</b>

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The data used for both tables above has not been fully updated since 2006, when the data was developed for the 2008 Plan Amendment. There is a need to update the data, to account for many changes, both on the ground and in the types and quality of data that has become available in the 18 years since the data was created. Updating this data will be a key part of the work for this Forest Plan revision.

## Trends, Stressors, and Drivers

The largest-scale impact to scenery on the Tongass is even-aged timber harvest in areas viewed from visual priority routes and use areas. Outside of timber harvest, there are few activities that alter scenery on the Tongass National Forest over a large area. Development both on and off the Tongass, including buildings, roads, communication sites, and other small-scale developments, can affect scenery, but generally at a smaller scale. Mining operations have potential to introduce large-scale modifications to scenery, but current mining operations are located in remote areas and do not dominate views from nearby visual priority routes.

In 1997, and again in 2016, the area available for timber harvest on the Tongass National Forest decreased greatly. The actual harvest of less than 5,000 acres since 2016 has also been far less than the acreage predicted. Therefore, the effects to scenery within Tongass National Forest boundaries have been less even than what was predicted in the 2016 Forest Plan Amendment EIS. Further, previously harvested areas have grown in over time, gradually reducing effects of past harvest. Tongass National Forest scenery resource specialists consider an even-age harvest unit to no longer be considered an “opening” at about 30 years post-harvest. By this time young trees are approximately 30’-40’ tall and the coniferous canopy closes, obscuring the ground below; logging debris, landings, borrow pits and roads are also typically screened. The difference in tree height between even-age harvested areas and non-harvested adjacent stands, which may be two to three times taller, may cause the unit shape to stand out and the unit may still appear unnatural depending on unit shape.

In many areas, the viewshed is a combination of land managed by Tongass National Forest, State, private, Alaska Native Corporation, National Park, or other land ownership. There has been about 6,000 acres of timber harvest on Tongass National Forest lands since 2016. Timber has also been harvested on adjacent lands during that same time period. Therefore, from some visual priority routes, the harvest on other lands has lowered the scenic integrity, even if no changes were made on National Forest lands.

Roads can also impact scenery, creating a linear break in trees. Temporary roads are usually colonized with alders within a few years of closure, which shows up as a bright green strip that can be very visible on a hillside. Since the 1997 plan, few permanent roads have been constructed. Temporary road construction has also decreased since then, with the reduced amount of timber harvest.

Natural phenomena may also affect a viewer’s perception of the intactness of a landscape. While natural phenomena may not be viewed as a negative effect on scenery for some people, others may see any vegetation loss or soil/rock exposure as a negative effect. For example, landslides can leave an area entirely denuded of vegetation for anywhere from 5 years to decades. Windthrow does not leave a completely unvegetated patch like a landslide but does leave toppled trees that die and can create a break in the treed landscape. Windthrow may also be seen as a negative byproduct of nearby harvest activities if new openings in the tree canopy introduce wind pressure to trees that were previously sheltered. Insects or disease can also cause high tree mortality and thus affect scenery, although there are few large areas of continuous tree mortality on the Tongass National Forest as of now (USDA Forest Service 2023). Melting

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glaciers can alter views, leaving bare rock and glacial till where ice covered in previous decades. Most of these natural phenomena are expected to increase in frequency with climate change.

The future Scenic Integrity Objectives should consider possible scenery impacts of climate change and incorporate adaptive measures if possible. For some of these natural processes, education is key to helping sectors of the public unfamiliar with the ecological processes of Southeast Alaska understand phenomena which are natural and not misinterpret them as a result of poor or uninformed land management decisions. At the same time, understanding which of these natural processes can be affected by management is important when updating management direction.

## New information and data gaps

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In order to update plan components in the revised Forest Plan, “the Responsible Official shall take into account scenic character (§ 219.8(b)(2)) and consider aesthetic values, geologic features, scenery, and viewsheds” (§ 219.10 (a)(1)). (FSH 1909.12 Chapter 20, section 23.23f). Full consideration of scenic integrity, scenic character, aesthetic values, scenery and viewsheds in the revised plan, requires that the decision maker uses updated information that reflects current conditions and values.

Because a full evaluation of scenery has not been completed since 2006, all aspects of the scenic inventory will need to be reviewed and updated to consider changed condition, new information, improved data and mapping capability, and other changes over the past 18 years. Some of the known changes are described here.

There have been some changes in scenic condition since 2006. Those changes, including new timber harvest, older openings growing in, mine expansion, and other uses have affected only a small portion of the entire landscape, though they may be locally important. Though relative minor in scale, those changes will need to be considered in the new existing scenic Integrity model to meet the intent of the 2012 Planning Rule for scenic integrity objective mapping.

Concern levels, or the importance of scenery to those viewing it, will also need to be updated to reflect new data and changed use patterns. Changing visitor use patterns have altered the relative importance of some travel routes and use areas. These have changed for various reasons. Some of the changes are due to increased cruise traffic and even some different routes than in 2008. For example, there are additional cruise ship dock locations, such as those constructed in Hoonah since 2015, and in Klawock in 2024. These can increase the number of people using a specific cruise ship route. In some areas, there has been an increase in trips on smaller cruise ships that can access areas where larger ships cannot, adding new cruise routes which are not in the current visual priority routes. Trail and recreation site improvements under the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA), and development of new cabin sites under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Spending Bill (BIL) also tend to attract new use or higher levels of use along with increased concern for scenic integrity. This is not to say that all viewsheds for all VPRs should be protected; visitors to a multiuse National Forest should expect to see some evidence of multiuse activities. However, constituent input must be sought and weighed in the balance when deciding upon appropriate long term management direction.

Scenic Integrity Objectives are currently derived from a combination of Distance Zones at which the landscape is viewed (foreground, middleground, background, or seldom seen) from relevant VPRs and the Land Use Designation type. Because Land Use Designations are likely to change under the revised

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Forest Plan, the considerations in developing Scenic Integrity Objectives need to be reassessed to make sure the resulting Scenic Integrity Objectives are appropriate to the suitable uses in each area.

The boundaries and laws governing designated Wilderness, recommended Wild and Scenic Rivers, LUD II, along with other designated areas such as Research Natural Areas, are not subject to change in this Forest Plan revision. While the laws governing these areas do not necessarily require a specific Scenic Integrity Objective, their low development condition will remain the same. Therefore, they are unlikely to have major changes in Scenic Integrity Objectives.

The inventory data for existing scenic integrity will be updated as part of the Forest Plan revision, as the first step in developing revised Forest Plan components related to scenery. These updates to the Scenery Management data which forms the basis for scenery management will be updated before revised Forest Plan components are developed. The Forest Service Washington Office developed a National Scenery Management System Inventory Mapping Protocol (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2020) to meet the requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule, supporting Forest Service Manual and Handbook direction. Products created as part of that protocol will include:

- Scenic character descriptions – a combination of the physical, biological, and cultural images that give an area its scenic identity and contribute to its sense of place.
- Scenic attractiveness – degree of scenic diversity across the landscape.
- Concern levels – importance of scenery to those viewing it at points and travel routes across the forest or nearby on non-Forest Service lands.
- Landscape visibility – landscape sensitivity and how/where people view scenery.
- Scenic classes – a combination of concern levels and visibility, assigns the importance of scenery for comparison with other resources.
- Existing scenic integrity – intactness of scenic character attributes.

For the first three bullets above, the existing condition will be reviewed, but it is anticipated to be similar to 2006, when scenic conditions were last developed. While these will be reviewed as part of the inventory, they are expected to have a small magnitude of change.

The last three bullets, which include the importance of specific viewpoints and routes, will also be reviewed and are expected to have greater changes. These will be based on the changes in Visual Priority Routes and Use Areas, as well as improved slope data. The resulting inventory and report will be completed for use developing the draft land management plan.

## Key Takeaways

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- Scenery is an important resource, both for residents' well-being and visitor satisfaction. Currently, about 88% of the Tongass has high or very high current scenic integrity.
- The current Scenic Integrity Objectives are being met on a Forest-wide scale.
- Scenic Integrity Objectives are based on an overlay of viewing distances from visual priority routes and use areas, and land use designations (LUDs).
- There have been changes in the existing scenic integrity on the Tongass National Forest since the 1997 Forest Plan, though not widespread on a Forest-wide scale. Areas with even-aged timber

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harvest in the 1990s have grown in, with improved scenic integrity, and fewer areas have been harvested since that time.

- Due to Scenic Integrity Objectives and scenic integrity analysis put into place in 2008, scenic integrity has been considered in management activities since then. Further, there has been less harvest since that time, and harvest (and other management) is designed to minimize scenery effects in visible areas. Scenic integrity has therefore improved since 1997, on a Tongass-wide scale.
- The current Forest Plan direction for scenery is based on many different factors and appears complicated as written. Direction could be clarified for a more direct description of how scenic integrity is considered and sustainability is assured on the ground.
- The current Forest Plan direction for scenery is focused largely on timber harvest, and does not consider, or provide direction to, all types of uses. Consideration of other uses and other impacts will be important in creating integrated plan content in the revised Forest Plan.
- Because Scenic Integrity Objectives are based partially on Land Use Designations, they will change as Land Use Designations are updated to management areas in the Revised Plan. Scenic Integrity Objectives will be reviewed for all LUDs. However, the practice of using a formula of sight distances along with Land Use Designation types to determine scenery impacts and design features required in project design generally protects scenery under the current Forest Plan.
- Visual priority routes and use areas, existing scenic integrity, landscape visibility, and concern levels will be reviewed and modeled using the most updated information available. This updated Scenery Management System Inventory and Report is scheduled to be completed to support development of updated Scenic Integrity Objectives for the Plan Revision.

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