



Lands: Status, Ownership and Uses

Tongass National Forest – Forest Plan Revision



Cover Photo: The Federal Aviation Administration operates and maintains a communications facility on Kruzof Island. The site consists of three antenna towers, an equipment building, and necessary grounding mechanisms. The antennas extend the communication capabilities of commercial air traffic (December 2024).

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Forest Service Alaska Region

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Introduction

This assessment report describes land ownership and status, use and access patterns related to the Tongass National Forest. It discusses lands special uses of the Tongass, defined as use of National Forest System lands by parties other than the Forest Service itself. Finally, it describes current methods and the potential for additional ways of meeting joint management objectives across land ownership boundaries, in partnership with other agencies, communities, and landowners, which include Alaska Native Corporations. (Cooperation and co-stewardship efforts with Alaska Native tribes is more thoroughly covered in the *Tongass as an Indigenous Place* assessment section).

Land status refers to the legal and administrative information about a piece of land, including its ownership, jurisdiction, and use provisions. Land use describes the types of activities that occur on the land, which can include development or activities that are not considered ground-disturbing. The Forest Service's special uses program authorizes uses of National Forest System land. A special-use authorization is a legal document such as a permit, term permit, lease, or easement, which allows occupancy, use, rights, or privileges of agency land. The authorization is granted for a specific use of the land. Examples of special uses include video productions, water transmission pipelines, telecommunications, research, and road and utility rights-of-ways. This assessment covers what the Forest Service refers to as "lands special uses." These are uses other than recreation, mining, timber harvest, and other forest products. A discussion of recreation special uses can be found in the *Recreation and Tourism* assessment report. Other uses are covered in the *Timber, Energy and Minerals, Watershed Condition and Water Resources*, and *Infrastructure Assessments*.

Resource Importance

The importance of the Tongass National Forest's land area and its resources are heightened because of the predominance (80 percent) of Forest Service managed land in the Southeast Alaska panhandle (Figure 1). Many land uses in the region will therefore involve the USDA Forest Service.

The extent of federal land, development and maintenance of transportation and utility systems and the availability of natural resources have been vital to shaping and sustaining local economies, cultural integrity and the quality of life for residents of Southeast Alaska. Roads and trails provide access for people to walk, bike, ride, or drive to their destinations, and allow for specially authorized uses and traditional and gathering and harvesting of forest products. The management of access routes and infrastructure is an important role of the Forest Service, especially as communities are wholly surrounded by federally managed lands.

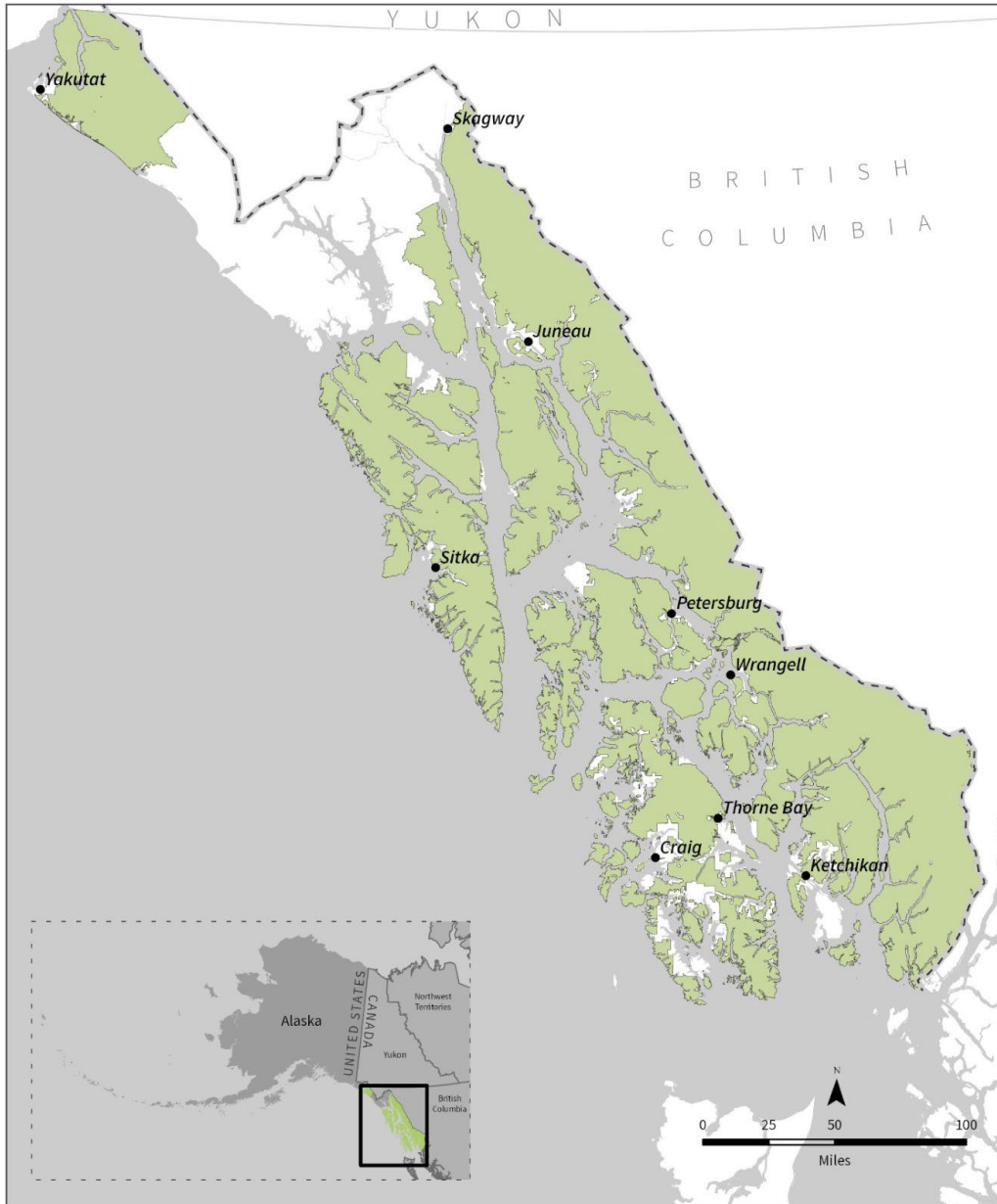


Figure 1. Tongass National Forest Vicinity Map.

Resource History and Current Management Direction

History

Alaska Region National Forests were established on Alaska Native traditional lands and territories. The traditional territories of the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian Peoples underlie what is now managed by the United States Federal Government as the Tongass National Forest.

Alaska Natives have been stewards of these lands and waters through time immemorial. We acknowledge and honor their traditional knowledge, sacred relationship between the people and the land, ancestral legacies, and their commitments to future generations. The *Tongass as an Indigenous Place* assessment section discusses the values and knowledge systems of the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian people as expressed by Tribal and Alaska Native Corporation representatives during the public engagement process. This assessment instead focuses on the current land ownership, status and uses as defined by the United States government.

Alaska was formally transferred to the United States on October 18, 1867. This purchase ended Russia's presence in North America and ensured U.S. access to the Pacific northern rim. Alaska became a state in 1959. The federal government manages approximately 61% of Alaska and the State manages about 28% of its total area. Table 1 provides a timeline of key legislation influencing land status and ownership, uses and access in Alaska. There are many more acts, and amendments to previous acts, that have guided land ownership and uses in Southeast Alaska over the past 150 years.

Table 1. Legislation timeline for lands in Southeast Alaska.

Year Enacted	Legislation
1862	Homestead Act: Allowed people to “claim” land. It was not until 1898 that special legislation extended the provisions of the act to the territory of Alaska.
1906	Alaska Native Allotment Act permitted individual Alaska Natives to acquire title to up to 160 acres (0.65 km ²) of land in a manner similar to that afforded to Native Americans. The 1956 amendment added the provision that the applicant must provide evidence of use and occupancy.
1907	Tongass National Forest (and Chugach National Forest) established by Presidential proclamation
1947	Tongass Timber Act authorized the Secretary of Agriculture to sell “timber growing on any vacant, unappropriated, and unpatented lands within the exterior boundaries of the Tongass National Forest in Alaska, notwithstanding any claim of possessory rights” (Alaska Forest Association 2008), to ensure a steady supply of wood for pulp mills.
1958	Alaska Statehood Act authorizes transfer of approximately 105 million acres of federal land to the State of Alaska — an amount that was deemed to be sufficient for the newly formed state to become economically self-supporting.
1971	The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) established a structure with regional and village corporations, conveyed 44 million acres of land, and provided almost a billion dollars in compensation. When oil was discovered in Prudhoe Bay in 1968, the U.S. Congress took particular interest and started the discussion on Alaska Native land claims so the Trans-Alaska oil pipeline could be constructed.
1980	Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) provided varying degrees of protection to over 157 million acres (640,000 km ²) of land, including national parks, national wildlife refuges, national monuments, wild and scenic rivers, recreational areas, national forests, and conservation system units. It guides many aspects of land management in Alaska, and directly addressed subsistence (rural hunting fishing and gathering rights). ANILCA stipulates the designation of wilderness, subsistence management, transportation in and across parklands, use of cabins, mining, archaeological sites, scientific research studies and more.
1998	Alaska Native Veterans Allotment Act of 1998; 43 U.S.C. 1629g: Alaska Native Vietnam-era Veterans Land Allotment Program allowing certain Alaska Native veterans a new opportunity to apply for allotments under the Alaska Native Allotment Act.
2004	Alaska Land Transfer Acceleration Act (PL 108–452) was a law passed on December 10, 2004. It was an attempt to resolve the conflicting land claims of three groups in time for the fiftieth anniversary of Alaska's statehood in 2009.

Current Management Direction: Forest Plan

The Forest Plan includes direction for all major resource uses, including lands and special uses. Direction in the current Forest Plan relevant to Lands includes forest-wide standards and guidelines about how to

perform a land ownership review (aka land status), coordination with others, special uses administration, land ownership administration, lands activity maintenance and landline location, rights-of-way and land ownership adjustment (USDA 2016 pp. 4-26 to 4-35). The 2016 amended Forest Plan includes many provisions from other regulation and policy, such as Forest Service manual and handbook direction for land status and ownership, uses, and access. In some cases, the Forest Plan repeats manual and handbook direction, and in others adds specific direction on how to implement that direction.

Scope and Scale of Assessment

The scope of this assessment includes land ownership and status, lands special uses, and current and potential cross-boundary land management approaches.

The assessment considers two spatial scales. First, the broader scale considering neighboring lands, acknowledging that interactions between different land management jurisdictions, uses and access networks affect each other. Second, lands within the Tongass Administrative Boundary, recognizing that Forest Plan direction only applies to National Forest System lands within that boundary (Figure 2).

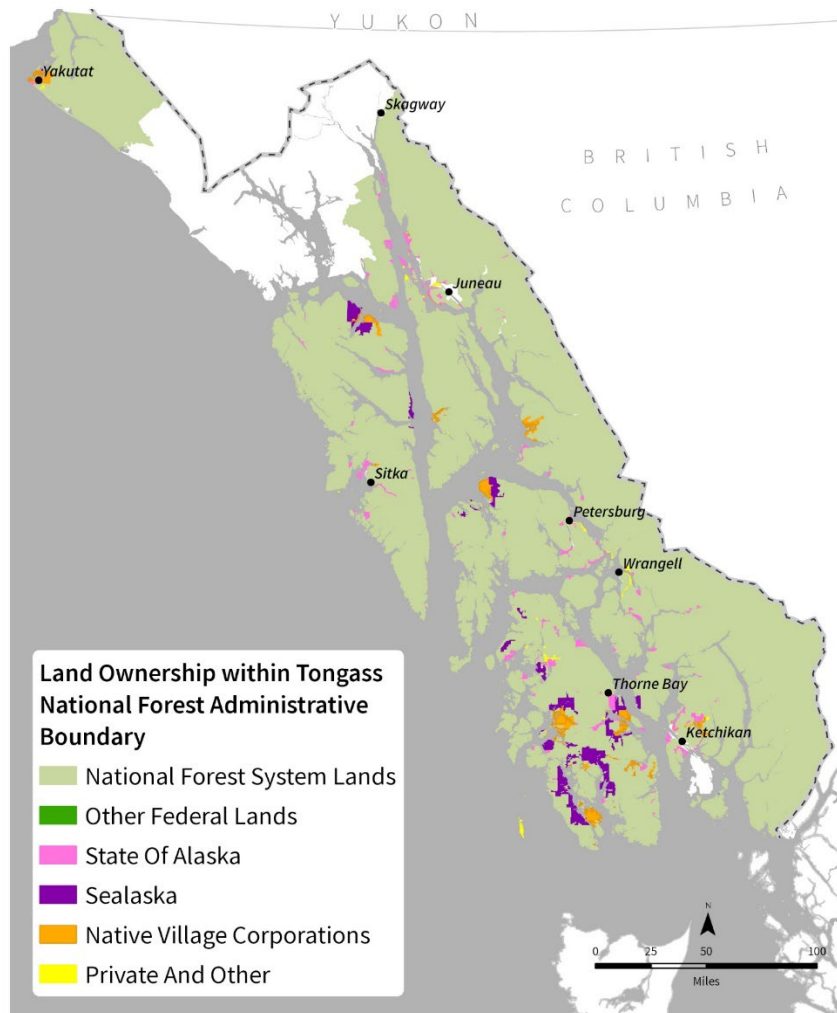


Figure 2. Simple map showing the Tongass National Forest and lands of other ownership interspersed within the Tongass National Forest.

Status and Trends

Land Ownership and Management

As can be seen in Figure 1 above, the lands managed by the Tongass National Forest are mostly contiguous, meaning that there are relatively few inholdings fully surrounded by the Tongass National Forest. Notably, more than 1,000 islands of varying size are included within the national forest boundary. There are many adjacent lands, however, that are partially surrounded by National Forest lands, and the infrastructure for many communities lies on or directly adjacent to National Forest lands. The Tongass National Forest makes up about 80% of the lands in the Southeast Alaska Region, with another 14% in Glacier Bay National Park. The remaining lands are owned predominantly by the State of Alaska, Alaska Native Regional Corporations, Alaska Native Village Corporations, or private owners.

Because most communities are very near lands managed by the Tongass National Forest, their infrastructure, such as communication sites, waters supply, energy generation sites, and access roads, are often on National Forest lands. This is one of the many ways that the National Forest has an important role in supporting community sustainability.

Land Ownership and Status Adjustments

Land ownership adjustments are the process of changing ownership of or jurisdiction over lands. Land ownership status on National Forest System lands can change through various types of land adjustments, including land exchange, land purchase, land donation, easements, and disposals such as Small Tracts Act sales and administrative site disposals. There may also be congressionally mandated landownership adjustments such as Alaska Statehood Act and ANCSA entitlements.

Land ownership status within the Tongass is complicated by ongoing land conveyances pursuant to various federal statutes. The Alaska Native Allotment Act of May 17, 1906, provided for conveyance of up to 160 acres to Native individuals who had occupied lands prior to their designation as national forest, under conditions prescribed by the Act and federal regulations. A small number of Native allotment cases on the Forest are pending adjudication by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). There also continue to be land adjustments to finalize the few remaining State land selections and Alaska Native Corporation land selections pursuant to the Statehood Act and ANCSA. The Forest Service works with the State of Alaska, Department of the Interior BLM, Department of the Interior National Park Service, and other agencies and organizations as part of this statewide land program.

Uses of lands that have been selected for conveyance but remain part of the National Forest pending that conveyance, are currently restricted. The existing Forest Plan contains direction ensuring that management is consistent with the restrictions. As part of the Forest Plan revision, we will review the language restricting activities on these lands to ensure it meets the requirements of current law, regulation and policy.

There are common types of land ownership adjustments occurring on the forest including title transfers, easements and withdrawals. The direction for these land ownership adjustments is found in existing, law, regulation and policy. However, the Forest Plan can highlight important management considerations for land ownership adjustments and can identify locations of specific interest for adjustments such as land exchanges. Direction in the revised plan will be consistent with these other laws, regulations and policies.

Title Transfer

For more than 50 years, BLM-Alaska has overseen the largest land transfer program in the Federal government involving the transfer of over 150 million acres of Federal lands (USDI 2023). The transfers include lands across the entire State of Alaska, not only in the Southeast. They include:

- 45.7 million acres under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971
- 104.5 million acres under the Alaska Statehood Act of 1958
- 16,034 parcels applied for under the Native Allotment Act of 1906
- 1,070 parcels applied for under the Native Veterans Act of 1998
- 379 parcels applied for under the [Alaska Native Vietnam-Era Veterans Land Allotment Program](#), Sec. 1119 of the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act of 2019 (to 04/16/2024)

Since 1997, the Tongass National Forest has conveyed about 240,000 acres to other entities (Tongass land record system). The largest disposal to one entity was 104,000 acres transferred to Sealaska Corporation as part of the Land Entitlements under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), mostly completed in 2015. Other notable disposals are in addition to the above, and include about 18,500 acres granted to the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, in exchange for about 19,000 acres granted to the Forest Service. In that case, the land acquired by the Forest Service must be managed to preserve the undeveloped natural character of the land and wildlife and scenic values of the land.

Since 1997, the Tongass National Forest has acquired about 52,000 acres from other entities. The largest acquisitions were the 2016-2020 Cube Cove land purchases. Over 22,000 acres of land, which was an inholding within the Admiralty Island National Monument, was purchased by the Forest Service and became part of the Kootznoowoo Wilderness.

Easements

An easement is a non-possessory interest in land, which allows for use of specifically identified sites or routes. The land does not change ownership. Certain rights are granted to the easement holder.

Landowners are allowed reasonable access to their lands, across National Forest System lands under provisions of ANILCA and other federal laws. Easements are issued to the State of Alaska Department of Transportation & Public Facilities (ADOT&PF) for state-managed highways. The Forest Service administers road, trail and rights of way authorizations, which include a railroad right-of-way, ADOT&PF easements, Forest Road and Trail Act easements, and easements and rights-of-way permits authorized under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA).

The Forest Service can also acquire easements for public use across non-Federal land. For example, the Forest Service can obtain easements across private land for a road that allows the public to access public land.

State of Alaska 4407 Transportation Easements

In August 2005, Congress enacted Section 4407 of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act – A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) (Public Law 109-59), which grants certain easements and rights-of-way to the State of Alaska and United States, respectively. The easements under SAFETEA-LU are for uses such as transportation and utility corridors, log transfer facilities and marine access facilities in and around the Tongass National Forest, to provide access to intermingled ownerships.

Withdrawals

Land withdrawal is the withholding of an area of federal land from settlement, sale, location, or entry for the purpose of limiting activities to maintain other public values in the area or to reserve it for a particular public purpose or program.

An example is mineral withdrawal, which is a formal designation by the Secretary of Interior that precludes entry or disposal of mineral commodities under the mining and mineral leasing laws. Unless withdrawn, National Forest lands are open to mineral entry. However, designated Wilderness is withdrawn from mineral entry unless it is specifically excepted at the time of designation. Claimants with claims located in areas withdrawn from mineral entry retain valid existing rights, if such rights were established prior to the withdrawal date (USDI 2023).

Special Uses

The following section provides an overview and when available, trends for various types of land special uses occurring on the Tongass. The uses presented are not all inclusive. Rather, the objective of this section is to demonstrate the diversity of land uses on the forest. Some of these uses, including roads, water-related uses, hydropower facilities, and transmission lines are also discussed in other assessment reports (*Watershed Condition and Water Resources*, *Energy and Minerals* assessments, respectively). They are summarized here to show the relative number and importance of these uses, but trends and resource concerns, related to these uses, are covered in other assessment sections.

Lands special uses on the Tongass National Forest include commercial and non-commercial uses, public, non-governmental organization, and government uses. Several acts of Congress authorize occupancy and use of National Forest System lands and interests in lands administered by the Forest Service. Most lands and special uses related direction is set by law, regulation (36 CFR 251) and Forest Service policy. The Forest Plan does not override these.

Table 2 summarizes the number of authorizations (leases, easements, permits) by special use category, using data in the Forest Service Special Uses Data System.

Table 2. Number of lands special use authorizations on the Tongass National Forest, as of December 2024. Data obtained from the Tongass Special Uses Data System database by Melissa Dinsmore, Tongass National Forest.

Special Use Designation	Approximate number of uses (December 2024)
Privately owned cabins under ANILCA	107
ANILCA temporary camps	18
ANILCA set-net camps and cabins	24
Fish Hatchery, mariculture, residences	11
Community Uses	10
Research	37
Construction and Industry	21
Energy	26
Transportation	51
Communication Uses	87
Water related uses	31

ANILCA Uses

ANILCA (Section 1316) provides for the continuance of existing, and future establishment, and use of temporary campsites, tent platforms, shelters, and other temporary facilities and equipment directly related to and necessary for the taking of fish and wildlife. Outfitter and guide services which are for the taking of fish and wildlife may be allowed for certain temporary camp facilities. These structures can support both customary and traditional uses. These facilities and uses are managed in accordance with ANILCA and Forest Service Alaska Region policies.

Aquaculture

ANILCA Section 1315(b) provides that the Secretary of Agriculture may permit fishery research, management, enhancement, and rehabilitation activities within National Forest System Wilderness, in a manner which adequately assures protection, preservation, enhancement and rehabilitation of the wilderness resource. Subject to reasonable regulations, permanent improvements and facilities such as fishways, fish weirs, fish ladders, fish hatcheries, spawning channels, and stream clearance, egg planting and other accepted means of maintaining, enhancing, and rehabilitating fish stocks may be permitted (USDA 2016).

Privately owned cabins (under ANILCA)

The Forest Service authorizes special use permits for certain privately owned cabins that existed on National Forest System lands in Alaska prior to the passage of ANILCA. These cabins are mainly used as shelter to allow traditional and customary uses, such as fishing, hunting and gathering. These cabins are often referred to as “ANILCA cabins.” There are about 100 “ANILCA cabins” on National Forest System lands in Alaska that are subject to the direction contained in Forest Service Handbook 2709.11, Chapters 40 and 50. Continued use and maintenance of these structures is authorized by ANILCA to continue Alaskan residents’ unique lifestyle.

The Alaska Regional Forester recently modified the policy on the reissuance of special use permits for ANILCA cabins for traditional and customary uses. The new policy clarifies the Forest Service’s exercise of ANILCA authority to reissue permits for certain ANILCA cabins. The Forest Service defines reissuance as authorizing a new special use permit for the same use when the ownership of a cabin changes hands.

Filming

Commercial filming involves the use of motion picture, videotaping, sound-recording, or any other type of moving image or audio recording equipment on National Forest System lands that involves the advertisement of a product or service, the creation of a product for sale, or the use of actors, models, sets, or props. This does not include broadcasting breaking news. A special use permit is required for all commercial filming activities on National Forest System lands, including documentaries.

Research

Research permits allow researchers to install measurement devices or other infrastructure, or complete other activities to support education or scientific research. Some examples of authorized activities are University research, and research done by other agencies, such as weather stations and seismic stations for informing the National Weather Service and US Geological Survey. Other examples are weather stations located at low elevations on the Tongass National Forest for the Alaska Climate Research Center at the University of Alaska Fairbanks has

Communications Sites

Communication sites are important for safety and communications throughout Southeast Alaska. They include navigational equipment, radio repeaters, radio towers for emergency communications, cellular phone towers, and microwave towers, to allow communication. The Forest Service administers more than 50 communications sites on National Forest Service land in Southeast Alaska. These sites are often on high points in high elevation areas, where signals can transmit without topographic interference.

Power Lines

The Forest Service's management of energy resources is based on a systematic, active, and adaptive approach to changing conditions and demands for energy production, use, transmission, and distribution. By building strong alliances and partnerships with energy interests with other Federal agencies, State and local governments, Tribes, private landowners, non-governmental organizations, and international partners, the Forest Service energy role is leveraged to effectively contribute to the sustainable development and use of energy resources.

There are permitted power lines that cross lands managed by the Tongass National Forest. Recently updated Handbook directives around power line operating plans has increased the priority of development, review and approval of these plans. Operating plans allow and set the parameters for maintenance. Updated operating plants are necessary to avoid maintenance backlogs, and must be put into place. Operating plans and agreements address electrical grid reliability, public safety, and avoidance of fire hazards. The revised Forest Plan will continue to ensure compliance with the new directives.

Hydroelectric Projects

Hydroelectric power is Alaska's largest source of renewable energy, providing about 21% of the state's electrical energy in an average water year (Federal Energy Regulatory Commission 2024). Most of the hydroelectric generation facilities in Southeast Alaska are within the Tongass National Forest. Most hydroelectric facilities are regulated by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) and the Forest Service cooperates with them on hydropower licensing and renewals. Sometimes, additional special use permits overlap with FERC licenses for specific infrastructure, and power lines connected to these hydropower facilities are under power line permits. More detailed information about hydropower and other renewable energy can be found in the Energy and Minerals Assessment.

Coordination on Joint Management Objectives Across Land Management Boundaries

The 2012 Planning Rule requires that National Forests consider, “opportunities to coordinate with neighboring landowners to link open spaces and take into account joint management objectives and opportunities to coordinate with neighboring landowners where feasible and appropriate”, when revising a Forest Plan. On the Tongass National Forest, there are many opportunities to coordinate with neighboring landowners which include Federal and State agencies, Alaska Native Corporations, and communities. These joint management objectives are not all necessarily related to lands or land uses regulations, which is the focus of this assessment section.

The Tongass National Forest already has many partnerships with local communities, tribes, Alaska Native Corporations and other organizations, that are intended to manage toward similar resource objectives, across multiple land ownerships. Because resources, such as salmon runs, cross land ownership boundaries, it is important to consider the greatest benefit achieved through restoration or other actions that cross boundaries. Some examples of existing cross-boundary partnerships include:

Hoonah Native Forest Partnership

The Hoonah Native Forest Partnership is taking a community-based approach to watershed-scale planning and establishing measurable project implementation. The goal is to promote a sustainable mixture of timber, salmon and deer production, as well as other natural products (e.g. berries, botanicals, firewood, and other minor forest products), that support diverse local economies and promote healthy watersheds. The Hoonah Native Forest Partnership project area encompasses entire watersheds, which include lands owned by Sealaska and Huna Totem Corporation and public lands managed by the Forest Service. (Hoonah Native Forest Partnership 2019).

Kéex' Kwáan Community Forest Partnership

The Keex' Kwaan' Community Forest Partnership (KKCFP) uses collaboration and application of state-of-the-art land management tools as an approach to watershed-scale planning and achieving balanced economic, social and ecological outcomes. The KKCFP has identified three value-based natural resource concerns including: (1) high costs of energy and the potential for timber and non-timber forest products to provide revenue to a historically impoverished and underserved community; (2) quantity and quality of fish and wildlife habitat and overall ecosystem resilience considering climate change; and, (3) the reduction of access to lands for clean water and traditional and cultural practices such as wild food, medicinal plant, and firewood gathering (USDA Forest Service 2024c).

Klawock Indigenous Stewards Forest Partnership

The community of Klawock, located on Prince of Wales Island, is surrounded by water, rivers and streams that are home to salmon runs that have nourished the community for thousands of years. Over the past two decades, salmon returns have decreased, motivating the community to investigate the root causes and find potential solutions to help improve fish habitat in the area, restoring local streams and fish populations along with them.

The [Klawock Indigenous Stewards Forest Partnership](#) (KISFP) partnership employs residents of Prince of Wales Island as stewards of their own lands, watersheds and rivers, lakes and ocean they feed. From stream restoration to salmon habitat improvements, the projects led by the KISFP lean on the knowledge of residents who have spent their lives hunting, fishing and living off the land, working together with local tribes, corporations, government and other landowners and community members. The partnership represents a shift in how the community collaborates with partners both local and regional to address environmental topics.

In the summer of 2023, the KISFP focused on a stream restoration project at Big Salt Lake, located five miles outside of Klawock to improve salmon returns and deer habitat, and restore balance to the forests. The work was spearheaded by a group of residents led by KISFP Coordinator, who also serves as Stewardship Coordinator for [Shaan-Seet Incorporated](#), the village corporation for Craig (Sealaska 2023).

Key Takeaways

- Because the Tongass National Forest makes up about 80% of the land area of Southeast Alaska, private and public infrastructure and uses often occur on the Tongass National Forest. Lands and lands special uses includes activities such as road construction, reconstruction, and maintenance, easements for access to other lands, communication sites, privately owned cabins, educational and research uses, and many others.

- Many land ownership adjustments have been, and likely will continue to be, driven by outside factors, such as legislation, that are not within the discretion by the Tongass National Forest. The largest blocks of land and the largest total land area will remain in the hands of the Federal government.
- Pursuant to land exchanges with the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, approved in 2017 and finalized in 2021, the Forest Service conveyed land to the Mental Health Trust and acquired lands that must be protected from development. The Revised Plan will be updated to be consistent with laws, regulations and policies regarding these exchanged lands.
- The current Forest Plan includes prescriptive standards and guidelines for Special Uses and incorporates Forest Service manual and handbook direction, ANILCA and other laws and regulations. Reducing duplication is a goal of the 2012 Planning Rule, and therefore the duplication may be reconsidered in the revised Forest Plan. Tongass-specific direction about how land use designations and uses will be reviewed with a goal of maximizing consistency with the 2012 Planning Rule.
- There are opportunities with adjacent land managers to meet joint management objectives across the landscape. There have been successful examples of meeting joint management objectives with adjacent landowners, especially for watershed restoration. These can be used as models, or starting points, for future coordination.

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