



▶ TONGASS FOREST
PLAN REVISION

Draft Wilderness Inventory Webinar

Questions & Answers

July 10th, 2024

1) Thanks for the information about how roads, wilderness areas, powerlines and substantial improvements are excluded from the inventory. How do remote installations like communication and remote sensing affect suitability in this process.

While compiling the Draft Wilderness Inventory, we considered regularly maintained installations and communication sites, meaning sites that require maintenance access at least once a year. Radio repeaters are the only permanently installed vertical structures on the Tongass National Forest, and these sites are regularly maintained. ANILCA § 1310 authorizes reasonable access to, and operation and maintenance of, existing air and water navigation aids, communications sites and related facilities and existing facilities for weather, climate, and fisheries research and monitoring in conservation system units, such as designated wilderness. All the identified communication and remote sensing sites were included in the Draft Wilderness Inventory to be carried forward for evaluation.

2) How many parcels/polygons are in the draft inventory? What is the total acreage of the draft inventory?

As of June 5, 2024, the Draft Wilderness Inventory includes 20,684 polygons. The polygons cover 10,845,095 acres, which is 64.7% of the Tongass National Forest. Of the total number of polygons, 109 are greater than 5,000 acres, and the remaining 20,575 polygons are less than 5,000 acres. Polygons less than 5,000 acres are primarily islands, reflecting the nature of the Tongass National Forest as an archipelago. Islands, while small in acreage, can be of sufficient size as to make practicable their preservation and use in an unimpaired condition and therefore were included in the Draft Wilderness Inventory to be carried forward for evaluation. These numbers are subject to change as we move forward in this process and integrate Tribal and public feedback.

3) Is there a way to submit a request to de-list wilderness instead of recommending more wilderness?

Wilderness is designated by Congress, and only Congress can amend a wilderness designation. As part of the FS assessment for a plan revision, the responsible official identifies and evaluates information relevant to the plan area for existing designated areas located in that area, including wilderness and wild and scenic rivers and potential need and opportunity for additional designated areas. 36 C.F.R. 219.6(b)(15).

4) How are you viewing subsistence use and its compatibility with recommended wilderness? Subsistence is not mentioned in the Chapter 70 NFMA Regs, but there is language that states under 74.1 - Management of Recommended Areas “When developing plan components for recommended wilderness areas, the Responsible Official has discretion to implement a range of management options. All plan components applicable to a recommended area must protect and maintain the social and ecological characteristics that provide the basis for wilderness recommendation. In addition, the plan may include one or more plan components for a recommended wilderness area that: 1. Enhance the ecological and social characteristics that provide the basis for wilderness designations; 2. Continue existing uses, only if such uses do not prevent the protection and maintenance of the social and ecological characteristics that provide the basis for wilderness designation;”

Point number 2 in particular pertains to my question.

We have included areas that are used for subsistence in the Draft Wilderness Inventory. However, if there are specific areas where a member of the public views wilderness recommendation as incompatible with subsistence practices, we encourage the public to tell us about those specific concerns. Additionally, if there are particular areas where a member of the public believes wilderness recommendations could provide protection for subsistence uses, please provide those comments.

Follow up Questions: The NFMA regulations don’t mention subsistence. But can we acknowledge that on the Tongass, subsistence is very important and is different than other places? Does NFMA supersede ANILCA for subsistence? I would encourage you to listen to tribal governments about subsistence when you go through this Wilderness Recommendation process.

The Forest Service must comply with both NFMA and ANILCA. If the Responsible Official decides to recommend areas for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System, plan components (such as desired conditions, objectives, standards, and guidelines) will be developed to provide specific management direction for those administratively recommended lands. The public will be asked for input on those plan components, and the Forest may incorporate plan components that specifically address subsistence uses in a particular area. This is also true for other existing uses, provided such uses do not prevent the protection and maintenance of the social and ecological characteristics that provide the basis for wilderness recommendation. The Forest Service has already reached out to Tribes and the Alaska Native Corporations providing an opportunity for both engagement and consultation. They have extensive Tribal and public engagement plans that involve many methods for engagement, including visiting local communities, online engagement.

5) How do the "no more" clauses re: Wilderness in ANILCA affect this process?

The National Forest Management Act requires forest plans to consider wilderness resources when providing for multiple uses and sustained yield of products and services, and this requirement is consistent with ANILCA. Whether to recommend areas for wilderness designation is only one of many management options the Forest Supervisor must consider when deciding the best management for the Tongass National Forest into the future. There is no preconception that any areas will or will not be recommended for wilderness in the Record of Decision, and only Congress can designate wilderness areas.

6) To confirm, the current feedback period is on the Draft Wilderness Inventory only, correct? Will there also be future opportunities to comment on areas that move past the Evaluation stage, and if so, what's the timeline for those feedback periods?

Yes, the current feedback period is only for the Draft Wilderness Inventory. There will be additional opportunities to provide feedback on the draft evaluation when it is made available for public review, and there will be other feedback periods after that. For example, the next review after the Draft Evaluation will be a review of recommended wilderness, if any, in the proposed action. There will also be a formal comment period when the Draft Environmental Impact Statement is released, where we will invite comment on the many management approaches identified for the Tongass National Forest and their potential effects. The Draft Environmental Impact Statement will include a reasonable range of alternatives for many different management approaches beyond just recommended wilderness. Within that range of alternatives, we will incorporate a variety of wilderness recommendation options.

7) How do you plan on "ranking" areas inventoried in terms of the evaluation? Is this too soon to discuss? Have you looked at other forest evaluations and any thoughts on what the Tongass might consider. Examples include low, low-moderate, moderate, moderate-high, high, exceptional.

The current feedback period is only for the Draft Wilderness Inventory, which does not include a "ranking" of areas. We will share the evaluation process during public input opportunities for the evaluation step.

8) The Responsible Official at USFS has very broad discretion under the 2012 Regs to designate additional "management areas." Perhaps recommended wilderness and subsistence use could be a combined management area that is specific to Southeast Alaska.

Designation of management areas is a part of this planning process. The term "management area" may be used to describe how plan components (such as desired conditions, objectives, standards, and guidelines) apply to certain geographic areas of National Forest System land. Plan components for management areas guide future project and activity decision-making in that area. Management areas may be established for designated areas, such as congressionally designated LUD II lands or designated roadless areas, and they may also be established for administrative recommendations, such as lands recommended for wilderness designation. We welcome public input on appropriate management areas, the plan components that should guide those management areas, and ideas for how management areas and resource needs can be combined for effective management of the Tongass for the next 15 years.

9) Do you have a timeline on the Wild and Scenic River's draft eligibility study?

It will follow the same timeline as the draft wilderness evaluation. According to the current schedule, both are planned to be released after the final assessment in 2025.

For more information or to sign up for our email distribution list, please refer to the Tongass Revision Website: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/tongass/landmanagement/planning/?cid=fseprd1105492>



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