

Controversial timber sale can't find a bidder

By Kevin Gullufsen

Wednesday, June 6, 2018 5:50pm | NEWS



Juneau Empire file.

It seems nobody wants to buy timber on Kuiu Island.

After failing to sell the first time around, the controversial sale of a stand of old-growth trees on Kuiu Island, west of Petersburg, ended a second round of bidding Tuesday. Nobody made an offer as

of the June 5 deadline, USFS' Petersburg Office's Ted Sandhofer confirmed with the Empire on Wednesday.

The Forest Service would have received at least \$195,465.66 for the sale, the minimum bid in the second round. Preparing the sale cost much more.

Environmental groups, which have sued to stop the sale, say it's further indication that the 523 acres of remote forest aren't economically viable.

"Logging in Southeast Alaska is not a winning business proposition unless you have substantial subsidies from the Forest Service," Southeast Alaska Conservation Council Executive Director Meredith Trainor said.

Forest managers spent at least \$1 million preparing a National Environmental Policy Act review, said Petersburg Office timber staff Jorge Enriquez.

The NEPA review was the "big ticket item" in preparing the sale, said USFS spokesperson Paul Robbins, but that's before scoping of the site, which had to be redone under the rules for a new comprehensive land management plan.

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Enriquez said the office employed three foresters and a technician to do that work. The group mapped the Kuiu Island sale during 10-day trips by float plane to remote timber stand. The trips include per diem, housing and gas.

“It’s quite a big expense to do business out in the middle of nowhere,” Enriquez said.

Politicians have unfairly tasked the USFS with propping up the Southeast timber industry, Trainor said, which has fallen behind tourism and fishing as the economic driver in Southeast Alaska.

She referred to efforts by U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, to stall the implementation of 2016 amendments to the Tongass Land Management Plan, which added protections for salmon streams, and an ongoing attempt to repeal the Roadless Rule, which bars development on certain lands in the Tongass.

Murkowski’s moves were friendly to the largely mothballed Southeast timber industry, which has been in decline for decades. Couple political pressure with the USFS’ requirement to offer a certain amount of timber for sale, and Trainor said the agency is in the “hot seat”: It’s trying to fulfill unrealistic requirements to offer certain amounts of timber for sale.

“They’re trying to prove that they can get these sales out that prove positive and that they’re doing everything they can to make that happen,” Trainor said.

A Washington bidder did express interest in Kuiu Island, Enriquez said, and flew to Alaska to meet with forest managers. The person inquired how they could buy the timber stand over the counter, but their inquiry didn’t result in a bid.

Original bidding, from September 2016, was for about 30 million board feet on 866 acres, with a minimum bid going for \$233,711. Amendments to the Tongass Plan forced the USFS to reduce the size of the sale, removing timber next to ecologically-sensitive watersheds.

This time around, 13.4 million board feet on 523 acres of land for \$195,465.

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USFS spokesperson Paul Robbins said they plan on reoffering the Kuiu Island sale in July under similar terms.

Litigation over the sale is still in court.

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