



Forrest Cole, Reviewing Officer
Tongass National Forest,
Federal Building
648 Mission Street, Ketchikan, AK 99901-6591
Fax: (907) 228-6215 Phone: (907) 225-3101
objections-alaska-tongass @fs .fed .us

September 22, 2014

Dear Mr. Cole,

The following comments timely submitted by the City of Kupreanof are in response to Petersburg District Ranger Jason Anderson's Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) regarding the Mitkof Island Environmental Assessment (EA) Draft Decision Notice (DN). The City of Kupreanof, having previously submitted timely, specific, written scoping comments addressing this EA has legal standing and is hereby on official record as an Objector during the pre-decisional administrative review objection period pursuant to 36 CFR 218, Subpart B.

The Draft EA DN proposed volume eliminates 28,500,000 board feet of old growth forest on Mitkof Island further fragmenting the existing forest structure and function on an additional 4,117 acres. These impacts occur on top of the historic tally of over 15,133 acres of (predominantly) clearcuts along with the associated road systems within the 170 square mile area of national forest on the island.

This tally however, does not include an additional 3,900,000 board feet of timber in the Woodpecker Timber Sale planned and approved for extraction 12 years ago, yet which remains to this day unsold. Nor does this tally include the 4,100,000 board feet from the Overlook Timber Sale which remains under judicial purview.

Commenting Objector

The City of Kupreanof, is situated immediately adjacent to the EA project area on the Lindenberg Peninsula of Kupreanof Island. The City of Kupreanof was officially recognized by the State of Alaska as a second class city and incorporated as such on September 5, 1975. Kupreanof was founded by its residents specifically to protect, pursue, and sustainably maintain an independent rural Southeast Alaska lifestyle. An important part of that lifestyle is subsistence Sitka black-tail deer (“deer”) hunting to provide venison as an important dietary staple of high quality protein to the community. Hunting locally accessed subsistence deer resources within the area’s weather-protected waterways during the typically inclement weather of the fall hunting season is especially important. The waters which surround the Mitkof Island EA project area are important travel corridors affording small boat transportation safety to our residents seeking a local source for subsistence deer hunting. The City of Kupreanof strongly disagrees with Mr. Anderson’s DN Rationale,

“the trade-off between resource protection and social values ... provides a beneficial mix of resources for the public...”(2-DN/FONSI).

The City of Kupreanof supports the concept of micro sales for the purposes of sustainable small scale timber milling operations providing value added timber products for local consumption. However, our residents and the surrounding area’s rural residents have already borne the brunt of unsustainable scales of industrial clearcutting, a great deal of which has been liquidated for the purposes of foreign export to the specific detriment and sustainability of supplying quality timber to local small timber operators. The Mitkof EA Draft DN perpetuates this export policy to the detriment of the same small mill owners Mr. Anderson claims the Mitkof EA will benefit.

Project Overview

The Petersburg Ranger District (PRD) has administered timber sales and associated road building for the last 4 decades on Mitkof Island. These management activities have resulted in significant biological consequences to the structure and function of the coastal temperate rainforest community of the island and that of the adjacent Lindenberg Peninsula. The island’s once abundant populations of Sitka blacktail deer are among the highest-valued management indicator species (MIS) which have evolved as old growth dependent species on the federal lands of Mitkof Island.

Due to 40 years of ongoing PRD mismanagement, and DN/FONSI actions such as this one, the deer populations are being forced into a permanently degraded condition and for nearly a half century have proven incapable of rebounding to former population levels. The rapid conversion of the highest value old growth forest habitat on Mitkof Island to an even aged, young growth tree plantation status has resulted in a protracted *impairment of the productivity of the land* to provide a sustainable yield of subsistence deer resources to the communities of Kupreanof, Petersburg, and outlying borough residents. This DN represents a continuation of PRD mismanagement evidenced by the 45 years of hunting restrictions to rural residents’ ability to locally access their subsistence deer needs. The necessary scrutiny of impacts arising from this

timber sale on the other MIS such as marten, Queen Charlotte goshawks, and black bear, has been largely circumvented by the FONSI declaration of Mr. Anderson.

Arbitrary FONSI Rationale

The “Finding of No Significant Impact” of a planned timber sale involving an additional removal of 28.5 MMBF of old growth timber on an already heavily degraded island landscape adjacent to a similarly degraded landscape also incapable of maintaining resilient and abundant deer populations adequate to supply local rural residents’ subsistence needs is decidedly arbitrary.

Given the emergency deer hunting restrictions recently imposed on the Lindenberg Peninsula , the FONSI is capriciously disregarding the agency responsibilities for stewardship of all the renewable resources of national forest lands. In applying a reduced level of NEPA scrutiny through the EA, this pattern of agency disregard continues to systematically defeat the Congressional intent of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to take a “hard look” at the potential consequences of a federal action; the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) to maintain viable populations of old growth dependent species; the Multiple Use -- Sustained Yield Act of 1960¹ -- (MUSYA), (‘sustained yield’ is defined under MUSYA as the, ”achievement and maintenance in perpetuity of a high level of annual or regular periodic output of the various renewable resources of the national forests *without impairment of the productivity of the land.*”); and the congressional intent of Title 8, Section 801 of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA)² to, “... **protect and provide the opportunity for continued subsistence uses... on the public lands.**” ANILCA officially recognized rural Alaskan communities such as Kupreanof are dependent upon subsistence resources such as deer.

¹ [Multiple Use, Sustained Yield Act of 1960](#) (P.L. 86-517), **sustained yield** (from the national forests) means the “achievement and maintenance in perpetuity of a high level of annual or regular periodic output of the various renewable resources of the national forests without impairment of the productivity of the land.”

² "Congress finds and declares that ...

(1) the "continuation of the opportunity for subsistence uses by rural residents of Alaska is *essential* ..."

(2) the situation in Alaska is unique in that no practical alternative means are available to replace food supplies of fish and wildlife which supply rural residents;

(3) the "continuation of the opportunity for subsistence use of resources on public and other lands in Alaska is threatened by... the taking of fish and wildlife in a manner inconsistent with recognized principles of fish and wildlife management;"

(4) in order to fulfill the purposes of ANCSA...it is necessary (for Congress) to invoke its authority of the property clause and the commerce clause to **protect and provide the opportunity for continued subsistence uses... on the public lands;**

(5) "...and (Congress declares that) an administrative structure be established for the purpose of enabling rural residents who have a personal knowledge of local conditions and requirements to have a meaningful role in the management of fish and wildlife and of subsistence uses on the public lands in Alaska."

False and Incomplete Economic Rationale

To date the highest volume classes -- (and consequently the highest value wildlife habitat) have already been unsustainably and disproportionately liquidated (a practice known as “high-grading”) on Mitkof Island and elsewhere. The heavily subsidized “economic benefits” of timber sales have been consistently misrepresented by Mr. Anderson by failing to fully account for the taxpayer subsidies and externalized costs to the public which are necessary for timber sales to be “economic” (sic) at least, presumably to the buyer, which more often than not, resides elsewhere.

Regardless, the subsidized timber industry “profits” have been transitory, while the externalities of the biological and social consequences have been made effectively permanent. The social consequences include economic instability (aka, “boom/bust” scenarios) -- created when extractive industries target a limited pool of finite public resources. Community discord arises when this economic policy pits neighbors against each other. The false rationale is further evidenced by the failure to account for the economic impacts arising from loss of local access to deer as a dietary staple consisting of high quality protein and the cultural impacts of depriving rural residents from customary and traditional subsistence practices. Given the centuries necessary to restore the structure and function of mature old growth forest, the subsidy-dependent economic and biological rationales used in the DN/FONSI are patently biased, incomplete, fail to adequately address social impacts, and are ultimately economically and environmentally unsustainable.

False Mitigation Rationale

Scientific research³ makes clear, the full structure and function of old growth forest dynamics are not fully restored for two centuries or more after clearcutting. Public comments stressed the importance of no further loss of deer winter range. The DN rationale falsely claimed these concerns can be addressed by partial retention:

In response to these concerns, the majority of the high value deer winter habitat available for harvest in the project area was not proposed for even-aged harvest. Instead, units identified as important deer winter range were given retention rates of 66, 95, and 98 percent, (4 – DN/FONSI)

However the research is clear about the effects of reduced snow interception on the ability of deer to successfully forage and survive deep snow events.

³ Hanley, Thomas A.; Robbins, Charles T.; Spalinger, Donald E. 1989. Forest habitats and the nutritional ecology of Sitka black-tailed deer: a research synthesis with implications for forest management. Gen. Tech. Rep. PNW-GTR-230

“Forest overstories reduce snow depths significantly, **but only at high crown closures (>95 percent)**. Analyses of species composition and quality of the diet of black-tailed deer and nutritional quality of forages indicated digestible energy and digestible protein are probably the potentially greatest nutritional limiting factors for deer in Alaska.”
(Hanley, et al. Ibid)

Consequently, the agency bias and false rationale is made evident in the DN/FONSI that the retention rates would address public concerns about reducing critical habitat necessary for recovery of deer populations when in fact, the prescriptions would have known deleterious effects on deer survival in winter, and thus recovery of deer populations on Mitkof. ADFG surveys have historically recorded high rural dependence on deer resources. Contemporary surveys consistently document Mitkof Island’s rural residents still rely upon abundant and resilient deer populations. However, the economic, health and safety impacts associated with having to travel farther afield, or in some cases, simply be forced to do without, are simply ignored as a significant factor.

Agency Bias for Timber Industry Intentionally Disregards Scientific Research and Public Lands Impacts

The profound consequences of these impacts from unsustainable logging of high value wildlife habitat on Mitkof Island were predicted by research scientists, and federal and state agency biologists. The problem was identified in the early 1960's and summarized in a technical report produced by ADFG in 1985, titled, "The impacts of Clearcut Logging on the Wildlife Resources of Southeast Alaska." The very first paragraph to the introduction of this report states,

"Logging, as currently practiced and planned in southeast Alaska, has the potential to significantly and permanently alter large amounts of wildlife habitat. Wildlife species which are adapted to use existing habitat may decline and associated recreational and subsistence uses may be substantially reduced."

The post-logging collapse of the deer population of Mitkof Island is attributed to the loss of deer winter habitat followed by two hard winters in the late 60's and early 70's. This resulted in a 17 year closure and followed by 22 years of the most restricted deer season in all of Southeast demonstrating a dramatic reversal of a previously record abundance of Mitkof Island deer resources compared to the region as a whole.

In 1993, the joint Fisheries and Game Board Resolution⁴ stated:

93-66-BOG
RESOLUTION OF THE ALASKA BOARD OF GAME

WHEREAS, the Alaska Board of Game is mandated by the Alaska Constitution to manage wildlife resources on a sustained yield

⁴ <http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/regulations/regprocess/gameboard/pdfs/findings/9366bog.pdf>

basis for all of the people of Alaska; and

WHEREAS, the present forest management practice of clearcut logging in the Tongass National Forest occurs on a rotation which precludes regeneration of a forest with high volume old-growth characteristics; and

WHEREAS, research on Sitka black-tailed deer within the last two decades has indicated diverse high volume old growth stands are necessary for the continuation of viable populations; and

WHEREAS, Sitka black-tailed deer is the single most important wildlife species for the residents of Southeast Alaska for nonconsumptive and consumptive uses including subsistence, and

WHEREAS, forests with high volume old-growth characteristics are necessary to other wildlife species, which are also important to residents and visitors; and

WHEREAS, continued present forest practices affect the Board of Game's ability to carry out its constitutional mandate to manage wildlife on a sustained yield basis,

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED: by the Alaska Board of Game that the Tongass Land Management Plan be revised to protect forests with high volume old-growth characteristics to an extent providing for long-term maintenance of harvestable wildlife populations.

DATED this 19th day of March, 1993
Dick Burley, Chairman
Alaska Board of Game VOTE: 7 Favor; 0 Oppose

The Petersburg vicinity once supported the highest success rate of deer hunting in all of southeast Alaska for local residents. Due to the impacts of unsustainable logging of critical deer winter habitat and the increased access for poaching and wolf predation associated with the logging road system over the last 45 years, the residents of Mitkof Island and vicinity have suffered the most severe restrictions on local subsistence deer resources in all of southeast Alaska.

This DN/FONSI simply ignores this history, ignores its responsibility to maintain sustainable yield of forest resources, and perpetuates the failures of the past.

ADFG published a statistical summary of the season's deer hunter harvest in all Southeast communities in 1961. In terms of hunter success, Petersburg ranked the highest of all communities of Southeast with a hunter success rate of 97%. In 1961 Petersburg ranked the highest of all communities of Southeast in terms of highest average number of deer per hunter, (@ 3.5 deer per hunter), with a season total of over 1922 deer by 549 hunters.) However, in 2012, 147 hunters on Mitkof Island required 565 deer hunter days to harvest just 22 deer.

In 2013, the same restrictions on Mitkof Island, (of just one buck in a 14 day season) was

imposed on Lindenberg Peninsula, which was our hunting destination of last resort in regards to its weather protected access.

Stewardship Working Group Statements

Though largely presented by Mr. Anderson as a “micro sales” program during “Stewardship” workshops he directed in Petersburg, he explained the sale was intended specifically to support the local economy, yet practically half of the volume (13,400,000 board feet) of this sale is unsuitable for those purposes. That volume is planned as helicopter logging of 1473 acres of old growth forest. Therefore, almost half of the timber volume in this timber sale would occur as a single event -- singularly exported to China and/or elsewhere in the round -- along with the local jobs the timber would support.

Despite the claim made in the EA (2-DN/FONSI) that it would address, “*the need for a consistent economic supply of sawtimber on Mitkof Island*” nearly half of the sale volume cannot be regarded as a meaningful contribution to supporting the local economy for the purposes of local small mills. This continues a long-established pattern of prioritizing short term profit taking for the few elsewhere while imposing long term consequences for the many local rural residents.

Biased Biological Rationale Used in Response to Public Comments

In citing responses to specific subsistence and biological concerns raised by the public versus desires for continued timber extraction, Mr. Anderson explains in the Draft DN/FONSI his decision was significantly justified by comments made by representatives of the timber industry. This bias relies upon arbitrary predictions not commensurate with the obligations of stewardship and sustained yield.

I believe the predicted drop in deer density with the implementation of Alternative 2 will not be a significant impact; deer habitat capability at stem exclusion will be more than sufficient to carry the existing deer and, therefore, support the wolf population. My rationale is based on the following(4 – DN/FONSI)

This bias is further demonstrated by the DN/FONSI rationale resorting to invalid comparisons to dissimilar biogeographic circumstances in other GMUs of the Tongass. These comparisons contradict well known microclimatic factors of Mitkof Island affecting deer populations.

In other areas of the Tongass, such as GMUs 2 and 4 where habitat alteration is equal to or exceeds conditions on Mitkof Island, deer populations generally recovered in as little as 4 to 6 years after a severe winter conditions without hunting restrictions. In GMU 2, wolves are present and winters are typically less severe. In GMU 4, bears are the primary predator, and winters are typically more severe. This leads me to conclude that deep snow winters, combined with heavy wolf predation, are the primary influence on GMU 3 deer populations (see Merriam 1970, Smith et al. 1986 and ADF&G 2012) and the additional, minimal habitat reductions of Alternative 2 will have a negligible effect on Mitkof deer populations, and deer subsistence use opportunities. DN/FONSI - 5

Conclusion

The City of Kupreanof objection is founded upon deeply felt concerns that the PRD is continuing the mismanagement practices made evident by the last half century of timber sales activities which have demonstrated a failure to adhere to sustainable yield principles to all renewable resources. This is imposing profound and permanent negative social and environmental impacts on the rural communities of Central Southeast -- impacts which will endure long after short term profits are briefly realized.

The PRD is attempting to dodge its culpability of past and present actions by minimizing scrutiny of environmental impacts of this timber sale and is conscientiously circumventing the necessary "hard look" required by NEPA while elevating the application of false and deeply flawed economic assumptions over its obligations to the public's best interests.

Based upon these stated concerns of the DN/FONSI, the City of Kupreanof supports the No Action Alternative and lacking that, requests the agency take the necessary "hard look" of NEPA to initiate a full Environmental Impact Statement.

Sincerely,
David Beebe,
Councilman, and environmental representative,
by authority of and for the City of Kupreanof