Meridian Institute
Connecting People to Solve Problems

Tongass Transition Collaborative (TTC) Meeting Summary

May 1, 2017, Southeast Discovery Center, Ketchikan, AK

Meeting Objectives

- Revisit the purpose and unique role of the Tongass Transition Collaborative, and identify goals of ongoing collaboration;
- Share updates and progress on relevant initiatives;
- Provide input on the proposed work plan, indicators, and questions for the baseline socioeconomic monitoring study; and
- Identify tangible next steps with regards to a steady supply of timber and opportunities to coordinate across landowners.

Ongoing Collaboration: Identifying the Unique Role of the TTC

Collaborative Groups Matrix

After quickly revisiting the TTC purpose and goals as articulated in the TTC Charter, the group reviewed a draft matrix of collaborative groups that work on forestry and related issues in Southeast Alaska. One of the purposes of the matrix, which was an outcome of the last Tongass Collaborative Stewardship Group (TCSG) meeting, is to show the overlap in participation and/or missions, and the unique roles of each entity, while recognizing that we are all working toward the overarching goal of developing land management in Southeast Alaska for the future.

The matrix is a work in progress – it contains more information on some of the collaborative groups than on others. Group leaders will be asked for additional information that can be added to the matrix, and eventually the hope is to include data that can be visually displayed, e.g., content areas and maps. The following suggestions were offered to improve the matrix:

- Add a column with some tangible examples of work on-the-ground.
- Include a Venn diagram to show how the work of various groups overlap. Also, show what is NOT being covered.

The matrix can be accessed through this link, and anyone with additional suggestions should be in touch with Sarah Campen, Coordinator for the TCSG.

TTC's Niche and Unique Role

The TTC occupies a unique niche – particularly in its role as a regional entity that endeavors to support other groups. There are different levels of support needed for each of the local groups. One example would be the Prince of Wales Landscape Assessment Team (POWLAT), for which TTC provides an on-going support role. The group may benefit from some help in assessing alternatives in light of socio-economic analysis and tradeoffs. Another TTC role may be to provide input regarding implementation of relevant Tongass Advisory Committee (TAC) recommendations. And, depending on the outcomes of POWLAT's May 18-19 meeting, there may be a need for some implementation and monitoring support (either to POWLAT or the "parent group," POWCAC).

Updates and News: Making Progress on Implementation

All Lands Approach

Earl Stewart reported that the Forest Service has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Alaska Forestry Association (AFA) about working together on all lands approaches, specifically to enable knowledge sharing and learning between landowners and with the industry, and to promote shared leadership and stewardship opportunities. The MOU (which is aspirational only since it does not allocate funds) references timber supply, but nothing connected with bridge timber per se. The focus is on near-term supply from various landowners. AFA is also convening the All Lands group, which will be meeting later in the month. It was noted that an all lands framework can also help connect business needs with operability, particularly important given the high turnover among rangers and loss of institutional knowledge in the Forest Service. (See below for notes on the detailed All Lands, All Hands discussion that occurred later in the meeting.)

Challenge Cost Share (CCS)

Inventories: The young growth inventory is progressing well (anticipated at 1300 acres in 2017). The middle part of the inventory under Haa'Ani will also be going ahead under another contract, and there is funding for additional inventory work through outreach with other landowners. The State is also signing a contract to inventory 5,000 acres of old growth early this summer. In addition, the State is hiring cruisers from Terra Verde (which has experience in Southeast Alaska) to do quality control on those plats, as well as Forest Service plots. There was a suggestion to get all the field staff together to look at some sample plots as a way to avoid issues that have occurred on past inventories (e.g., missing defects). This idea will be passed along to Ed Soto. Stream work, which is an important metric for fall down, is getting underway in earnest. Preliminary numbers based on six fairly representative stands show roughly about a third of fall down is attributable to riparian issues.

Workforce Development is charging ahead. The results have been very promising so far. The State picked up three graduates for the young growth inventory. (More details later in the summary.)

Mass Timber: Wade Zammit and Chris Maisch are exploring options for long-term markets, specifically look at mass timber and Asian markets. Since the Southeast Alaska second growth wood profile fits this product, it could have competitive advantage.

Infrastructure Mapping: An effort is underway to inventory and map infrastructure (e.g., sort yards and roads to support the transition) for the five working circles. Draft maps will be mailed out soon for input.

LiDAR: The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Forest Service have signed an agreement with the US Geological Survey to conduct a LiDAR survey, with the hope of beginning in June.

Good Neighbor Authority: The State is developing a supplemental agreement on Kosiusko Island, and will be moving forward with a sale as soon as the agreement is signed. There is also movement on State ground in Ketchikan near a Forest Service young growth stand.

Work Force Development

Workforce Academy

12 students recently graduated from the last workforce academy in Thorne Bay. It was a competitive process – out of 30 applicants, 22 interviewed for 12 spots, with 15 of the remaining applicants showing promise as good candidates. Applicants ranged in age from 21-62, and had a variety of education levels from high school graduate to Doctorate in Biology. Six of the trainees were from Prince of Wales and six from off-island. They were split equally in terms of gender.

The curriculum was developed from three months of collaboration and planning, including a significant amount of staff time from Sealaska. There was an emphasis on field opportunities, as well as securing employment. As an outcome, nine of the trainees have secured employment (three are not seeking employment).

There is also a 90 day intern forester opportunity with the Division of Forestry. To date there have been two applicants from Oregon State, but no local applicants. There was a suggestion to consider recruiting from other institutions in the eastern US, such as Michigan Tech, Colby College, Maine, Montana State, Finger Lakes Community College, etc., and to reference a database of institutions that have forestry programs.

For more information about the workforce academy and job opportunities, see the Workforce Development Update handout.

Engaging Local Youth

Following the presentation about the workforce training academy, there was a lengthy discussion about the need to reach young people in Alaska. Earl Stewart mentioned that there were no Alaskan applicants for the Forest Service's Youth Conservation Corps out of Rangoon. The group acknowledged that schools represent an opportunity to reach more young people, but it is not enough to simply hand an outdoor curriculum to a school. Rather, there needs to be an implementer and champion in the school, someone to shepherd a program along. The group suggested that it might be helpful to consider contracting with someone to deliver education in schools, and/or implement an outdoor activities day that could be parlayed into a more formalized program. Other opportunities include the TRAYLS program (Training Rural Alaskan Youth Leaders and Students), and a proposed Tatoosh School program for local students.

Technical Training

In addition to broad-based outdoor education for youth, there are significant needs for technically trained workers. For example, the wood energy conference in Ketchikan revealed a gap in boiler technicians. It could be helpful to offer integrated training both for youth and older adults, with a preference for individuals in the region (and particularly from Prince of Wales), but open to others in the State if there is room. There could also be value in basic first aid and CPR training, basic hazmat courses, and ensuring that prospective workers are able to obtain drivers licenses. The group suggested the idea of funding someone to travel to Southeast Alaska and provide basic courses (e.g., first aid and CPR) for every high school and to help identify employment champions in the schools. There was a specific suggestion to consider establishing a subcommittee of the TTC to look at all these ideas and provide input about how to best allocate the Challenge Cost-Share workforce funding.

Societal Issues

The conversation then turned to the need for address larger societal issues of getting clean, staying sober, and just showing up to a job (common issues throughout Southeast Alaska). The group recommended that a program begin with basic work ethics and communications skills, followed by slightly more technical skills, such as running a chain saw safely. It would also be helpful to provide exposure to jobs (site visits, hearing from potential employers) and on-the-job training for the specialized jobs (such as diesel mechanics and cable yarding). While industry can provide on-the-job training for specific skills (e.g., cable logging), it might make sense to pay to send people outside of the State for specialized training where there are very limited opportunities in the State. A take-away from this conversation was that there is a critical role for approaches like the TRAYLS program that emphasize basic job ethics.

Year-Round Employment

The group recognized that another missing piece is filling the gap after summer employment. Now that there are two cohorts from the training academy, there is a need for maintaining employment during the off-season, and potentially building more skills. Options could include data entry in the Forest Service, fish work, cruising timber in other areas (e.g., "down south), and other "generalist" work. The group also recommended a shift in the institutional mindset that encourages employment in the woods all year long – for example by scheduling lower elevation projects in fall, winter, and spring.

In conclusion there was recognition provided to Stephen Suewing, Andrew Thoms, and Bob Gert who have been wildly successful in this arena – having accomplished more in the last six months than in the previous 30 years.

Socioeconomic Monitoring: Determining Study Questions

Heidi Huber-Sterns of the University of Oregon Ecosystem Workforce Program provided an overview of the proposed socio-economic baseline study for Southeast Alaska. For more information, see her presentation, Social and Economic Monitoring for the Tongass Transition, and handout, Socio-Economic Monitoring Project Overview.

Points of clarification, comments and Q&A following the presentation are included below:

Comment: One of the reasons for doing this type of monitoring could be to figure out impacts of changes in government policies. Many policies are very broad, with no metrics attached to know what impacts they are really striving for. We will have to think carefully about what we are really trying to measure (e.g., who gets work, dollar value, etc.).

Question: Is there an intention to differentiate between different types of timber sales (e.g., co-intent and restoration)?

Answer: It is easy to differentiate stewardships sales, but could be very difficult to separate co-intent unless those sales are reported on by the Forest Service as distinct from other types of sales. In reality, co-intent could be a subset of any of the other types of sales.

Comment: There are other useful metrics to consider – including beach buffers, volume and number of acres treated, watershed treatments, pre-commercial thinning, and total young growth acreage.

Comment: Understanding the health of industry as a whole could mean looking at coordinated and adjacent sales where there are different owners, Good Neighbor authority sales, etc.

Question: When does the baseline start?

Answer: The baseline starts two years ago, December 2016, when the TAC recommendations were finalized. It is point of time, looking back five years. Baseline as well as trend lines are reported annually.

Comment: If the baseline goes all the way back to the Secretary's memo then there are going to be changes that muddy the results.

Comment: The signing of the Forest Plan Amendment is when it should start because that is what really triggered changes.

Question: How will other factors, like fuel prices, state budgets, etc., be taken into account?

Answer: We try to understand and account for these kinds of factors, especially when there are any large unexplained trends.

Question: Do you look at market trends and their impacts?

Answer: We focus mostly on local factors, although we also track socio-economic trends at the county-level. It becomes hard to do meaningful analysis without a full-blown economic study.

Comment: Lots of decisions are based on markets.

Response: This is something to consider, maybe by incorporating information about market trends through qualitative explanation (i.e., telling the story).

Comment: The number of students as a whole could be an important metric (in addition to those who qualify for assistance).

Comment: Capital investments should be captured because they are indicative of confidence for the future, and, as such, can be a good metric for business health (possibly better indicators of business health than employment).

Comment: The Forest Service and local communities may not have the capacity or expertise to apply/utilize the information about impacts that are derived from this study. POWLAT is already asking a lot of questions about how the community could be impacted by different choices.

Response: There is a lot of interest in starting the study on POW. Heidi and Matt should talk!

Comment: Given the size of the Tongass, it will be necessary to divide it up by working circles for purposes of this study. Starting with POW could be challenging because it is the most complex. Kake would be fairly easy – but there would not be any meaningful trend lines. It could be interesting to look at both at the same time. It should be possible to supplement the available data with anecdotal information for each community.

Comment: It might help to draw the trend line back even farther by drawing upon previous work by the Forest Service and SEAK to gather information about impacts on industry over time (e.g., jobs per thousand feet).

Next Steps

Heidi will be looking at what data and metrics can transfer from other places, and will be examining how to look at things like co-intent. Then, mid- to late summer and early fall, the study team will start scheduling meetings and conversations to further flesh out what has been talked about today. The rough timeline is to produce the monitoring plan around January 2018.

Co-Intent: Identifying Opportunities for Stewardship Treatments

In the TAC analysis, volume from co-intent was an important component, so the hope is to use co-intent as early as possible, then use older young growth to fill the transition later. The Forest Service is still evaluating the subset of young growth that fits co-intent to determine how many acres of co-intent appropriate timber exists.

Forest and Stakeholders Working Together to ID Co-intent Opportunities

Involving stakeholders early on will offer the opportunity to develop purpose and need statement together and gain clarity on desired outcomes from co-intent projects. For example, there is not a lot of separation in what people want on Prince of Wales, but communication is a challenge. The challenge to each of us is to recognize those that are willing to try and celebrate their willingness to try (even if not ultimately successful). The solution partially lies in taking some of the related disciplines and letting "ologists" lead. The TTC can then provide support. By agreeing in concept, line officers will have the opportunity to lead the concept the first time through, and pick the right project to opportunistically demonstrate success. The TAC recommendation on co-intent is about defining collective interest, and allowing line officers to be the ultimate decision-makers.

A mapping exercise on the west coast of Prince of Wales has resulted in discussions among Forest Service staff about potential projects and by industry about timber economics. However, there is a need to include biologists as well as other stakeholders in the conversation early to help determine priorities and how to align them. On the agency side, biologists could identify parameters, go into the field together with timber industry representatives to identify possibilities, experiment, and document what works.

The group acknowledged that the conversation has to be on-the-ground – it cannot be theoretical or in a meeting room – and is most useful to have the conversation tied to an existing or proposed sale, or to help identify if a sale could be proposed next to an existing young or old growth stand. On the agency side, considerations include Land Use Designations (LUDs) and applicable standards and guidelines; from industry perspective, the road system and other economics need to be considered to determine what is/not feasible. The role of the TTC can be to bring Forest Service staff and other stakeholders together in the field to discuss specific projects and prescriptions. To support those interactions, the TTC has funds for a field trip similar to the past young growth symposium.

There is an opportunity here, but need parameters that can operationalize these ideas. The Forest Service will need to conduct a staff assessment or process that helps define opportunities and identify components before going out on-the-ground. The focus should be on developing ideas and conversation among staff and different departments to avoid silos and a focus not on what they *cannot* do, but instead a focus on what they *can* do. Parameters and questions could include items in sales preparation such as: defining what a merchantable tree is, followed by GIS analysis based on stand age, distance to road, and whether it fits in co-intent acceptable LUDs. Based on initial analysis, the most viable places are part of Mental Health Trust land exchange.

Scale and Accessibility

Scale and accessibility are a challenge for standalone co-intent projects – any potential projects will need to consider the economic viability. Opportunities to achieve scale are to find co-intent projects in an old growth reserve or beach buffer that are adjacent to other planned sales. Co-intent allows up to 10 acre clear-cut, or the opportunity to consider multiple openings of 2 acres or less. While a 10 acre opening can help achieve scale, smaller openings can help reduce litigation risk.

Timing is also an important issue when planning for the future, specifically with regards to including early input from stakeholders before the NEPA process is initiated. By looking at the five year schedule and having conversations with AFA and the State, opportunities can be identified. Beach/water access also offers new options – for example by using ground-based operations, and then relying on barge transport. Proposed locations for assessment include Shell Cove, Grivena, Rivella Island, Kosciusko, and Big Buck.

Focusing on Habitat Improvement

The group suggested that the Forest Service consider using focused Environmental Assessments for habitat improvement projects. However, since it is a new approach, it may draw a lot of attention, and therefore should be approached deliberately and thoughtfully. Coordination between biologists and silviculturalists can result in projects that achieve habitat improvement (wildlife benefits) and economic timber. With a focus on wildlife, groups like Trout Unlimited will be very interested in helping out and being involved in helping to identify locations, experiment and get creative about how timber and wildlife/streams can work together.

Bridge Timber: Making Progress On-the-Ground

Planning

The Tongass five year plan looks at the five working circles to determine priority areas for timber sales. The next check-in on the five year plan will be after the all landowners meeting at the end of May. The group acknowledged that that ultimately a longer-term (e.g., 10 years or more) plan will be needed to provide more certainty, by identifying opportunities across specialists and landowners, starting with three year plans for every program area, then five years. In the near term, though, the priority will be to identify gaps in the five year plan, and evaluate how other landowners can fill those gaps. This gap analysis will result in opportunities for shared infrastructure, and use of new authorities (e.g., Good Neighbor). In addition to long-term planning, long-term contracts and large volumes will enable industry to access financing.

This planning effort depends in part of information and feedback from the young growth cruise, including analysis of fall-down and what it means. Those results will then need to be analyzed to compare against TAC modeling, determine timeline, and how to prioritize locations. After more progress has been made during the field season, the TTC should check in again, perhaps with a one-day field trip at Valiner coinciding with the next in-person meeting in the fall. The focus of the field visits would not be to provide a recommendation on a particular project, but rather, would allow for identification of cross-boundary sales and opportunities.

Landowner Updates

The Mental Health Trust land exchange will help bring old growth sales in sooner; however, there are two bills that still have to pass the State legislature. The senate version has already passed and there is a hearing in the house rules committee today. On the Federal side, Senator Murkowski believes they can get a trust bill attached to the long-term appropriations bill (already done). It is in the omnibus for the rest of FY17.

Sealaska is moving forward with plans for 45 million board feet / year, and is continuing to push other landowners, especially the Forest Service, to produce harvest plans so everyone can operate. They will be focusing operations for next 8-10 years in the Heidelberg area.

Location Updates

The Forest Service has been focusing on sales that offer the most acreage as possible, rather than conducting large NEPA processes for small sales. A significant amount (20,000 acres) of old growth bridge timber is currently being inventoried. Upcoming sales opportunities include the following locations: Prince of Wales in 2019; Zarembo; Northwest Revilla Island; Shoal Cove; Shelter Cove; and Gravina Island.

The group discussed challenges with completing sales, for example the operability challenges on Wrangell Island, and the logistics of implementing a co-intent project in a riparian management area on Gravina Island. Some opportunities to overcome these challenges include coordinating with AFA, the State of Alaska, and utilizing Good Neighbor Authority.

Appraisal Process

The group reemphasized the need for the entire appraisal process to be revisited/revamped. The current Forest Service R10 process is not effective or efficient from the industry perspective – it is based on appropriations language and the use of the residual value appraisal system. However, the Forest uses a much more complex approach than is required. The State's residual value appraisal system was referenced as a potential model.

Prescriptions

Industry Role: The Forest is proposing to allow industry to assist with developing prescriptions by mark a stand of timber based on their needs and what will achieve an economic sale. The Forest Service would then cruise the stand and determine the prescription that meets their needs while producing the economic volume that industry requires. The concept is to understand what industry needs, and to determine how to make that fit what the Forest Service can do legally, based on standards and guidelines, etc. The result would provide an outcome where industry chooses what they need, ultimately harvesting less, which would be a win-win for environmentalists and the timber industry.

Helicopter Sales: Helicopter sales will be necessary to provide the volume needed for the industry. However, in order to appraise positively, there is a need to design prescriptions that can use the helicopter for other uses. To do this, there needs to be enough planning time to align projects with when a helicopter is already in use. A review of the five year schedule from an industry perspective could help to resolve this. Clarence Clark is in the process of putting together a draft paper describing the process, and the TTC could consider drafting a cover letter to accompany this paper acknowledging the importance of this issue. But we need to ensure that the message is strategic and high-level so that it does not become an encumbrance. Once the process is clarified, the letter should say that "this is reasonable and meets the needs of all the resources, and allows helicopter to stay in place to take care of restoration needs." The Helicopter report will be submitted to the Forest this week.

All Lands All Hands: Landowner Coordination

Coordinated Sale Scheduling

The next All Lands Group meeting is scheduled for May 31. The goal is to work on a joint five year sale schedule (specifically, to see what is available each year for next five years, both in old and young growth), come to agreement on that schedule, and then share with the broader group.

Work is underway on a template for capturing information for all landowners about projected sales (location, volume, timing etc.) for the next several years. The intent is to make sure there is sufficient timber across the landscape, and that it is made available on a schedule that works for industry to remain viable. This transparent landscape look at sales volume and scheduling will enable a conversation with industry and other stakeholders about what is possible and whether there is enough volume in bridge and young growth timber to support the transition. The goal is to provide 20,000 old growth in the first two years after the record of decision (ROD) signature. The Forest has received good feedback regarding what landscapes make most sense to consider. The hope is that this process will also help buy some time for the Forest Service by having other landowners step in.

The landowner meeting will be very instructive as to how well various jurisdictions can coordinate timber sales. It remains to be seen how much willingness there may be from various landowners to step back from near-term profits. For example, if there is no agreement to allow crossing other jurisdictions to access timber, they will have to forego acres or use really costly approaches. And ultimately, as noted previously, the landowner group needs to take a longer-term view.

There was a question about the role of Kosciusko in considering combined efforts among landowners. The response was that we are too far along with Kosciusko to use it as an example, although it will be a place to assess for missteps. In addition, the inventory on Kosciusko may reveal opportunities for mid- and longer-term projects. Valener may be better to highlight the land-owner cooperation piece.

Gate Schedule for Project Planning

The Forest Service provided detail regarding the Gate schedule for each project (this kind of information is not needed for the State schedule). The Forest Service's manual guidance requires six gates. Gate 1 is an economic assessment for the purpose of determining whether to invest in further planning (i.e., to make sure there are enough resources and sufficient opportunity to justify the NEPA investment). Gate 2 is NEPA through the Record of Decision (i.e., developing alternatives). The MOU with AFA deals with Gates 1 and 2. Gates 3-6 are implementation after NEPA. Good Neighbor Authority provides a mechanism for giving the responsibility of Gates 3-6 to others (e.g., the State) to help take the load off of the Forest Service. It also offers a view into how federal timber can perform under State regulations.

Forest Service Cultural Shift and TTC's Role

The adoption of an all lands, all hands approach means a significant cultural shift in the Forest Service. The MOU with AFA and the coordinated five year plan are evidence of this shift. Similarly, the fact that the Forest Service no longer views the State as just a contractor, now more of a partner, is another good indication – such communication and technical knowledge transfer is where the big value is.

The TAC recommended a cultural shift in the Forest and, through the TTC, has a huge role in helping to promote and support the shift. The TAC served to "ignite the candle" by offering a vision and demonstrating an all-in-it-together mentality and the value of collective effort. The TAC was the first group that actually reached a consensus, and their recommendations have already sparked action (e.g., a decision to support the transition by moving forward in the near-term with a larger chunk of old growth than might have been previously considered to keep industry afloat while getting to the "wall of young growth" that is coming). The TAC gave the Forest Service an opening and a blessing to try some new things – in other words, the grace to operate differently. The fact that the Forest is taking advantage of this opening is highly encouraging. The group acknowledged that it is okay if some initiatives don't work out; the real failure would be falling back to business as usual.

There are a number of specific ways the TTC can continue to lead, including helping to clarify with what terms like "no net loss" and "co-intent" really mean on-the-ground; addressing net fall-down; defining the path forward if there are losses (e.g., how do you come up with replacements, what are the mechanisms, how do they work?); and contributing to thinking about planning and review periodicity (i.e., every 5-10 years). The TTC might also help convene Forest Service specialists from different disciplines together with operators to look at things like biodiversity on skidder trails; how to coordinate mobilization of equipment around timber sales with watershed and habitat work; and to make sure that co-intent opportunities are considered up front.

Community Engagement

The Prince of Wales landscape-scale assessment is a specific opportunity for the TTC to be helpful, particularly when analyzing and assessing tradeoffs (e.g., regarding beach buffers). Similarly, there would be value-added in a stakeholder group staying engaged regarding Kosciusko, after they hand off their recommendations, and there is still a significant step to turn over implementation to a third party.

The group recognized the importance of finding incentives and specific ways to keep core people engaged and involved. Eventually the goal is to have significant involvement in each of the five working circles. Every community has some key people – the group needs to look beyond institutional mechanisms to broaden involvement to identify and engage the "wise people" while at the same time not depending too much on particular individuals. It gets complicated with all the groups involved. The overall incentive is that showing up provides a say in the outcome. However, there are still questions about the mechanism(s) for on-going engagement.

Action Items

- All members will send local job opportunities to Stephen Suewing for posting.
- Meridian will update the excel spreadsheet of TTC accomplishments as an internal resource for a paper/press release that recognizes actions that have occurred since the TAC recommendations. (This will acknowledge the success of previous action, and can help lead toward the willingness to take risks - celebrating successes is very important!).
- Earl will provide an update after the next all landowner group meeting.