



# Tongass Transition Collaborative Meeting Summary

*December 14, 2017, Ketchikan, Alaska*

On December 14, 2017, members of the Tongass Transition Collaborative (TTC) met in Ketchikan, Alaska with leadership and staff from the US Forest Service (USFS) and State of Alaska, as well as representatives from other organizations. (See Appendix A for a full list of meeting participants). The objectives of the meeting were to: share the vision and priorities of USFS leadership regarding forest management in Alaska; discuss successes and challenges associated with implementation of the Tongass Advisory Committee (TAC) recommendations; and prioritize opportunities for continued coordination and collaboration. Discussions focused on broad goals, successes, and challenges of implementing the TAC implementation recommendations, including work conducted under the Challenge Cost Share (CCS) Agreement between the State of Alaska and USFS State & Private Forestry, as well as updates associated with related individual initiatives and projects.

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## Vision for the Future: Leadership Perspectives

The meeting began with updates from USFS and State of Alaska leadership regarding priorities for land management in the Region. Regional Forester for Region 10 of the USFS, Beth Pendleton, opened the meeting with an overview of the changes in Agency leadership at the national-level, including the new USFS Chief, Tony Tooke, and the US Department of Agriculture Secretary, Sonny Perdue. In 2017, Chief Tooke developed a set of five priorities for the USFS, focused on the critical need to foster the work environment of employees and set expectations for how they accomplish work with partners to improve and enhance the resources provided by the nation's forests and grasslands. These priorities can be found [here](#) on the USFS website.

Chief Tooke's vision of shared stewardship is aligned with priorities on the Tongass, where staff are moving away from traditional approaches of working independently to engaging with others that can support their work on the forest. Each of the principles also align with the regional strategic focus areas of Alaska, which include ensuring a work place and environment where each employee feels safe, respected, and valued; placing a strong focus

on restoration and integration of work with others; focusing on sustainable recreation; maintaining and developing necessary infrastructure; and achieving common goals through partnerships.

Regional Forester Pendleton also acknowledged the initiatives headed by Senator Lisa Murkowski that could have implications for the Tongass. Specifically, she referenced the Senator's inquiry to the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to determine whether an Amendment to a Forest Plan constitutes a rule and therefore is eligible for review and repeal by the US Congress. In October 2017, GAO presented an opinion that the Plan is subject to Congressional review; however, there is currently no final determination for this inquiry. Senator Murkowski also presented draft legislation in the Senate Interior and Environment Appropriations Bill recently that would end (at least temporarily) the transition to young growth timber harvest, as well as permanently exempt the Tongass from the Roadless Rule.

In her opening comments, Regional Forester Pendleton touched on various challenges that the USFS is facing both nationally and in Alaska. First, funding needed to fight wildfires has resulted in reduced funding for all other USFS programs. This issue also impacts the ability of the USFS to hire new employees – the current number of full time employees in the Alaska Region is 540, while fifteen years ago there were approximately 1000. Therefore, the USFS must continue to think differently about how they accomplish their work with these reductions in budget and capacity. Regional Forester Pendleton emphasized that partnerships are key to the continued success of USFS programming, including the use of Good Neighbor Authority (GNA), which is critical for accomplishing work on public lands, such as fuel load reductions.

Alaska State Forester, Chris Maisch, reflected on how national priorities apply to the State of Alaska. He acknowledged the importance of fire funding, particularly in western states, where there is an ongoing dialogue between the Secretary of Agriculture and the Western Governors' Association regarding options for fire funding and borrowing. He noted that many State priorities are aligned with the regional priorities laid out by Regional Forester Pendleton, such as the creation of a ten-year joint timber schedule for multiple landowners, and investment in infrastructure, workforce development, and research and development for young growth timber utilization. Within research and development, the State is working to establish a statewide wood utilization plan that would focus on the development of new markets for young growth, manufacturing technology, and third-party certification of timber through the Sustainable Forestry Initiative. He concluded his comments by emphasizing the opportunities for timber harvest through ongoing partnerships, specifically through the use of GNA to allow the State to conduct some of the analysis for projects required under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

Tongass Forest Supervisor, Earl Stewart, gave an update on current efforts on the Tongass, focusing on highest priorities for the Forest, including cultural change among agency staff,

and project prioritization and implementation. With these priorities in mind, he shared brief updates regarding the following initiatives:

- ***Prince of Wales Landscape Level Analysis (POWLLA)***: POWLLA will analyze projects on Prince of Wales Island for the next 10-15 years by collaborating with USFS and State staff to develop alternatives that provide sustainability and certainty. Project focus areas include sustainable recreation, restoration projects, and old and young growth management.
- ***Central Tongass Landscape Level Analysis (CTLLA)***: Similar to the POWLLA, the CTLLA will analyze 10-15 years of integrated projects in the Petersburg and Wrangell Ranger Districts. Alternative projects to ensure sustainability include recreation opportunities, projects that support the Alaska Region Strategic Plan, vegetative management for local community benefit, and wildlife and fish resource improvement.
- ***Joint Chief's Prince of Wales Island Landscape Restoration Project (PWILRP)***: The PWILRP, conducted in partnership with the Natural Resource Conservation Service, will provide a template for landscape restoration projects and partnerships in nearby communities. Initial projects include a potable water source for the City of Hydaburg, tree thinning for black-tailed deer habitat on Sitka Ranger District, stream restoration on Scout Creek, replacement of restricting fish passages, a wolf population study, and LiDAR data acquisition.
- ***All Landowners Group***: USFS and other landowners in Southeast Alaska work together to provide a stable and reliable supply of materials for manufacturing facilities and their consumers by developing plans for timber harvest that reduce operating costs and improve economy of scale for timber operators.
- ***Challenge Cost Share Young Growth Inventory***: Together with the Alaska Division of Forestry, USFS is implementing a young growth and old growth inventory that will improve existing information on young growth, increase economic opportunities for communities, and utilize the expertise of the Alaska Division of Forestry.

For more details, please follow this [link](#) to a November 2017 letter to the Regional Forester.

Forest Supervisor Stewart also discussed a number of challenges related to work on the Tongass. Specifically, efforts to align around the five-year timber plan were impeded due to a lack of positive appraisal for the Wrangell Island timber sale. The USFS is currently exploring other areas where timber could be harvested in 2018. He also recognized staff capacity as a challenge due to the significant reduction of staff (approximately 50% from fifteen years ago). This in turn affects the ability of the USFS to implement the TAC recommendations and proposed projects in a timely manner.

Despite these challenges, Forest Supervisor Stewart emphasized that it is important that members of the community be made aware of the many successes of the work being done by

partners in Southeast Alaska so that bridges can be built between communities and those who are working on the Tongass. Leadership concluded their remarks with a reminder that the Tongass belongs to everyone in the community and that counsel from different stakeholders has been valuable in creating the opportunities that lie ahead.

During the discussion that followed the opening comments, participants shared updates on socioeconomic monitoring efforts in Southeast Alaska and asked clarifications on the details of the Congressional Review Act to repeal the Forest Plan Amendment.

***Socioeconomic Monitoring:*** The University of Oregon developed a set of questions for socioeconomic monitoring in September 2017. The first phase of the monitoring will entail setting a baseline for where communities in Southeast Alaska currently stand. Much of this data has already been collected for other purposes, and the research team is in the process of compiling it. The team plans to release a draft plan for the baseline study in March 2018 and will be looking for feedback at that point.

***Congressional Review of the Forest Plan Amendment:*** Should the Forest Plan amendment be repealed as the result of Congressional review, a Plan Revision would take a minimum of three years whereas a new Amendment would require a minimum of two years. The Office of General Counsel for the USDA is currently reviewing the GAO determination, which has also been submitted for review and recommendation to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). There has been no final determination from USDA legal counsel or OMB regarding the applicability of the Congressional Review Act.

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## **Implementing the Vision: Challenges and Opportunities On-the-Ground**

During this session, USFS staff presented an overview of work underway to implement the TAC recommendations for the Forest Plan, specifically focused on information generated from the ongoing stand-level young growth inventory, made possible by the CCS Agreement with the State of Alaska. One of the goals of this inventory was to demonstrate the complexity of young growth in the forest at the stand-level in order to make informed decisions about future management and harvest. In addition, crews performing inventories were the result of local workforce development efforts provided by the CCS. Participants showed appreciation for this path to provide opportunities for community members.

Through the inventory data, USFS staff discovered significant variability in attributes within stands including trees per acre, volume, diameter, and other attributes. This variability poses the question of whether the stand can be harvested when some areas have not reached the necessary volume. In addition to the current analyses, there are approximately 11,000 acres to be inventoried in the coming season. Due to the remote locations and the limited funding

remaining from the CCS, the USFS has chosen to inventory only a subset of the remaining locations.

### **Story Mapping**

In order to portray this vast dataset, the USFS is developing an ArcGIS story mapping tool that uses the geospatial inventory data to transparently display the findings of the inventory and project future forest growth. The majority of the tool is made up of individual plot-level polygons representing timber stands in the Tongass. It will serve as a resource for managers and harvesters to discuss net operable acres, view stand composition, height, and other variables, project the stand's value in coming years, and more. Participants at the meeting were given a preview and an opportunity to provide feedback regarding the tool and its uses. A public version of the site will be launched in the coming weeks.

### **Interpreting the TAC's Recommendations On-the-Ground**

As staff compiled and analyzed the data, they identified various questions and challenges related to implementation of the Tongass Plan Amendment – specifically, they had questions about the interpretation of the Plan Amendment regarding timber harvest on non-development land use designations (LUDs) and areas with guidelines for protection of specific resources. According to the Amendment, for young growth harvest in beach buffers, old growth reserves (OGRs), riparian management areas (RMAs, outside of TTRA buffers), and in stands with moderate vulnerability karst, “the maximum size of any created opening for commercial timber harvest must not exceed 10 acres with a maximum removal of 35 percent of the acres of the original harvested stand.” USFS staff illustrated that this statement could be interpreted in several different ways, particularly when the original stand encompasses multiple LUDs – it is unclear whether harvesters can take 35% of the total stand area or must exclude the non-development LUDs before calculating the 35% take. For example, if a stand is 100 acres, with 65 acres of timber LUD and 35 acres of OGR, the language could be interpreted in the following ways, among others:

- 35% of the total area (or 35 acres) is the maximum allowable cut for the entire stand, regardless of LUD;
- The 35% maximum applies only to the protected area (i.e., OGR), and therefore any amount can be cut in the timber LUD, while only 35% of the OGR (within the original stand boundary) can be cut; or
- 35% of the total original stand could be applied within the OGR, which in this case would result in a full harvest of the OGR within the stand boundaries.

The inclusion of moderate vulnerability karst complicated the issue further, because there was confusion regarding why it was included. Some participants felt that the addition of moderate vulnerability karst was not intended in the Amendment, because it was not included in the TAC's recommendations. USFS staff asked for feedback from participants on

the original intent of the TAC to include this language in the Amendment, and therefore, to provide clarity on how to interpret and analyze its effects. A subset of participants agreed to discuss the issue in detail during the following day's working session. (See December 15, 2017 TTC Working Session Summary for more information.)

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### **All Lands, All Hands: Landowner Coordination**

The Forest Service is currently under a hiring freeze with approximately fifty positions to be filled in Alaska once the freeze is lifted. Even with new hires, the Forest Service will need partnerships more than ever, as staffing will remain limited. The ability to work together with other landowners in the region will be critical in the future to achieve common objectives. Participants provided a variety of updates associated with current efforts to coordinate among landowners in Southeast Alaska, including implementation of the CCS Agreement, use of GNA, development of a coordinated five-year timber plan, the USFS land exchange with Alaska Mental Health Trust, and coordination with the Alaska Forest Association (AFA).

### **CCS Agreement: Updates and Lessons Learned**

The CCS was funded for \$4 million in June 2015. With several modifications for additional work, the total funding is now \$5.3 million. A large portion of this budget is designated to fund the young growth inventory. Additionally, \$915,000 was allocated for LiDAR work on the Tongass to verify the accuracy of the technology against the on-the-ground inventories being collected by crews. As of November 1, 2017, there is \$177,000 of the CCS funding that remains unallocated, while the agreement runs through June 30, 2020 with the potential for extension if necessary.

#### *Lessons Learned from the CCS Agreement*

**Communication:** Participants felt that additional time during the establishment of the CCS would have been beneficial to help overcome barriers of language and culture between the State and the USFS. They also expressed a need to have spent more time with those implementing the CCS activities to think through the details of the work, predict the time necessary to complete activities, and understand more accurately the steps of the process in advance of implementation. However, once parties involved communicated regularly, it laid the groundwork for forethought and better collaboration in other work such as the purchaser layouts for sales under the GNA.

**Data:** The different systems used to collect, analyze, and share data lacked compatibility, and therefore required significantly more effort than expected to reconcile. It was also difficult for USFS staff to determine how to use the data collected in real-time, as opposed to planning ahead for how the data would be used.

**Trust:** Trust between partners was key for an efficient process. It took time to build, but helped create productive relationships between parties and more support for outcomes. This trust also helped in the establishment of the GNA. Allowing time for people to get to know each other created the relationships needed to move the process forward efficiently.

### **Good Neighbor Authority**

GNA is a title under the Farm Bill of 2014 that allows the USFS to enter into cooperative agreements with US states and Puerto Rico. The bill is up for reauthorization in 2018. The State of Alaska signed a GNA master agreement with the USFS in November 2016, followed by a Supplemental Project Agreement (SPA) in May 2017. The first young growth timber sale was sold through GNA in September 2017.

While the master agreement is a high-level agreement to initiate the program, a SPA is a specific agreement for a given project. Each new significantly different project requires a new SPA, which can then be modified for similar types of projects. Along with this, projects require analysis under NEPA, which can be time and cost intensive. Therefore, one participant suggested that the State look for projects in areas where environmental assessments have already been done such as on Heceta Island.

### **Coordinated Five-Year Timber Plan**

The All Lands Group, comprised of the USFS, State of Alaska Division of Forestry, Sealaska Timber, Alaska Mental Health Trust Lands, and University of Alaska Trust Lands, met in May and October of 2017 to coordinate efforts, and, specifically, to develop a joint five-year timber sale plan. While progress has been challenging, the group currently has a draft plan in one-year increments. From there, they will create action plans for timber harvest based on recent productivity, availability of infrastructure, and other proposed projects. In addition, the group prioritized nine facilities where updating infrastructure was critical for improving efficiency.

### **Mental Health Trust Land Exchange**

Legislation for the land exchange between the USFS and Alaska Mental Health Land Trust passed in May 2017. In May 2018, the Forest Service will execute phase one of the agreement, focusing on Prince of Wales and Ketchikan. They also discussed a programmatic agreement at the end of 2017, which will be put in place in March or April of 2018. The Forest Service and Mental Health Trust signed a cost collection agreement at the end of 2017, and are in the process of clarifying roles and responsibilities. The exchange will provide four to five years of old growth timber volume, which some participants recognized as a critical bridge in the transition to young growth harvest.

### **Memorandum of Understanding with Alaska Forest Association**

To communicate the industry perspective on proposed projects, the USFS signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with AFA, with funding provided by the State. Multiple participants acknowledged the value of meeting with industry representatives on-the-ground to illuminate challenges that industry must consider when determining whether or not to purchase. In addition, incorporating such feedback from industry can help increase USFS credibility and build relationships with industry stakeholders.

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### **Workforce Development**

Part of the TAC recommendations included a focus on developing a skilled local workforce for projects on the Tongass. Efforts for workforce development have been underway for sixteen months including trainings, networking, engagement of youth, mentoring, and other activities, many of which were funded by the CCS and implemented through partnerships with local organizations, including Sealaska and Spruce Root Community Development Fund, among others. The Forest Academy had twelve attendees, nine of which found jobs upon graduation. Of the two training academies that have taken place, four graduates have jobs this winter. Meeting participants acknowledged that the keys to success of these programs include preserving skillsets, creating access points to enter into the workforce, and moving away from temporary employment.

Another program developed to address workforce development, Training Rural Alaska Youth Leaders and Students (TRAYLS), focuses on community health needs aligning with forest health. This program teaches young adults the skills for jobs, but also provides a support system and teaches the basics of obtaining and holding a job while taking care of themselves so they are healthy and ready for work.

### **Priorities for Future Workforce Development**

Goals for future workforce development opportunities in 2018 include:

- Continued program development with TRAYLS and resource academies;
- Strengthening and building new partnerships to help provide youth with the resources they need;
- Expansion of the programs to new populations and communities;
- Locating support for internships in industry to help youth gain experience needed to be competitive hires; and
- Improvement in crew leadership and coordination.

Participants discussed the issue of young adults moving away from Southeast Alaska because they cannot find work and/or do not have the resources to be trained locally,



concluding that earlier exposure to careers in natural resources will lead to higher rates of youth staying in the area and finding related work. Participants also suggested that establishing more opportunities in the area for education (e.g., certifications, college credits, and internships), mentorship, and exposure to different fields of study (e.g., botany, silviculture, geology, etc.) would help to funnel young adults into the local natural resource workforce.

Participants discussed how to maintain momentum for the program, acknowledging concerns about future funding (after CCS expires) and future participants to take advantage of the programs being developed. Participants also stressed the importance of communication between those working in workforce development programs and those hiring employees in the area, to ensure that locals are aware of Southeast Alaska job opportunities.

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### **Building Support at All Levels**

To conclude the meeting, participants reflected on key regional priorities and challenges from the day's discussions, offering the following suggestions and reflections:

- Continue to work with neighbors and partners to build bridges and tear down fences so that they remain relevant with the community.
- Encourage industry participation in future discussions to ensure a representative mix of perspectives.
- Be proud of these accomplishments – Southeast Alaska is leading the country in this type of collaboration and change!
- Continue to educate those outside the room of the work that is happening within the group and find allies in the community that can help identify additional opportunities.
- Maintain and continue building trust and collaboration.
- Always return to the vision of helping local communities and preserving and growing Southeast Alaska.

## Appendix A: Tongass Transition Collaborative Meeting Participant List

### In-Person Participants and Staff

- **Matt Anderson**, USFS, Tongass National Forest
- **Jason Anderson**, USFS, Tongass National Forest
- **Alicia Bell Sheeter**, USFS, Tongass National Forest
- **Jessica Davila**, USFS, Tongass National Forest
- **Bob Girt**, Sealaska Timber
- **Tyler Gunn**, USFS, Tongass National Forest
- **Susan Howle**, USFS, Tongass National Forest
- **Sophie Gutterman**, Meridian Institute
- **Patrick Kelly**, University of Alaska, System Office
- **Chere Klein**, Office of US Senators Lisa Murkowski & Dan Sullivan
- **Christine Klein**, University of Alaska, System Office
- **Chris Maisch**, Alaska Division of Forestry
- **Beth Pendleton**, USFS, Alaska Region (Region 10)
- **Diana Portner**, Meridian Institute
- **Conor Reynolds**, The Nature Conservancy
- **Sheila Spores**, USFS, Tongass National Forest
- **Earl Stewart**, USFS, Tongass National Forest
- **Charley Streuli**, USFS, Tongass National Forest
- **Stephen Suewing**, Alaska Division of Economic Development

### Teleconference and Video-Teleconference Participants

- **Sarah Campen**, Tongass Collaborative Stewardship Group
- **James Eleazer**, Alaska Division of Forestry (partial participation)
- **Nicole Grewe**, USFS, Alaska Region (Region 10)
- **Jessica Kayser Forster**, Sustainable Growth Solutions
- **Brian Kleinhenz**, Terra Verde, Inc. (partial participation)
- **Patrick Lavin**, Defenders of Wildlife
- **Tom Parker**, USFS, Tongass National Forest
- **Carol Rushmore**, City and Borough of Wrangell
- **Michael Shephard**, USFS, State and Private Forestry
- **Andrew Thoms**, Sitka Conservation Society (partial participation)
- **Austin Williams**, Trout Unlimited (partial participation)