

2019 SOUTHEAST ALASKA FORESTRY SYMPOSIUM

SUMMARY



OCTOBER 21-23, 2019 | KETCHIKAN, ALASKA

THE LANDING HOTEL

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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RESOURCES

More information is available at <https://tongasslandmgmt.org/>.

Cover photo credit: Cassidy Gasteiger

INTRODUCTION

The 2019 Southeast Alaska Young Growth Forestry Symposium was the third in a series of three planned symposia associated with the transition to young growth forest management on the Tongass National Forest and surrounding lands. The symposium, largely a panel-based and discussion-oriented event, convened October 21-23, 2019, at the Sunny Point Conference Center at the Landing Hotel in Ketchikan, Alaska.

The purpose of the symposium was to provide a presentation and discussion forum to share newly acquired and/or updated data and information concerning forest resources, forest management and related issues, workforce development, and other challenges and opportunities for Southeast Alaskan communities. In developing the agenda for the event, facilitators Meridian Institute and Spruce Root, Inc. conducted approximately 20 hours of interviews with state and federal agency staff, industry representatives, conservation organizations, consultants, and tribal government staff and ANCSA corporation staff. This event was open to the public and was attended by industry groups, agencies, non-governmental organizations, community and tribal governments, researchers, and private businesses. See Appendix A for the participant list.

The purpose of the event was to create a space for data sharing and enable collaboration across Tongass stakeholders. The Tongass Advisory Committee (TAC) efforts and the sense of community that was fostered through that process were acknowledged. Thanks to the work coming from the TAC recommendations, we have more and better information about the timber base. The arc of the symposium content progressed from regional level context, from a socioeconomic snapshot of Southeast Alaska and the TAC process and recommendations, to young growth inventory data and report-outs on workforce development and community forestry initiatives. The event concluded with a half-day series of working group sessions, enabling participants to explore new needs, opportunities, and challenges arising on the Tongass. The agenda and other background information are available on the [Tongass Transition Collaborative website](#).

While not all stakeholders will agree on how best to manage every aspect of the forest, the broad range of attendees indicated a broad desire to ensure a healthy forest and healthy forest economy, while honoring the people who live here now and who have lived here for generations. This document reflects a collection of key themes and takeaways from the symposium.

WORKING TOGETHER: COLLABORATION ON THE FOREST

In an effort to frame both the event and work on-the-ground, TAC members and agency staff provided historical context for collaborative efforts and coordination among landowners, as well as implementation of the TAC recommendations. Agency culture change, shared approaches to management, coordinated investments, improved transparency in decision-making, and workforce training and development were emphasized. While the collaborative nature of the TAC recommendations and work was broadly recognized as valuable, there were challenges with the framework. The practicality of a 15-year horizon for the transition to a young growth-based industry on the Tongass has been uncertain, due to questions around available inventory.

The Challenge Cost-Share Agreement between the US Forest Service (USFS) and State of Alaska Division of Forestry to fund the inventory and workforce development programs was the most tangible outcome from the TAC recommendations.

The purpose of the CCSA was to support: completion of a comprehensive forest inventory (including mainly young growth acres as well as some old growth stands); development of a local workforce so benefits accrue to the region; infrastructure development for “all lands – all hands” management initiatives; and other projects as relevant. The inclusion of Good Neighbor authority also facilitated a number of projects in the intervening years. Good Neighbor Authority initially authorized the state to work directly with USFS, and has since been expanded to authorize tribal entities to negotiate agreements as well.

QUESTIONS AND TAKEAWAYS

Following the panel, participants discussed the viability of the transition to young growth, given the updated data and information. Panelists emphasized that the TAC recommendations were based on data available at the time (2014-2016), and a lot of new data has been collected and analyzed since that time. As the focus of the Symposium shifted to an overview of that data, some participants expressed the importance of considering the following:

- **Incentives for local processing:** Consider not only the incentives for mill owners/operators, but also incentives for agencies and others to source locally.
- **Young growth volume:** Given the fall-down associated with young growth stands, consider the amount required for a viable transition and what that might mean for the timeframe of the transition.

SOCIOECONOMIC CONTEXT: EXPLORING ECONOMIC TRENDS IN THE REGION

Regional data experts and academics placed the discussion in the context of a healthy forest economy by: providing an overview of current economic status and trends in the region as illustrated by changes in economic contributions by industry; reviewing the purpose, scope, and initial data from a baseline study that explores the socioeconomic conditions of the region; and sharing updates from recent US Forest Service projects.

Workforce and capacity challenges are common across the western US, as are concerns about industry transition in rural communities facing similar timber environments. Researchers from the University of Oregon have begun a social and economic monitoring study to explore the implications of a transition to young growth-based forest management. As the first step of the study, researchers have been conducting a baseline study, focused on socioeconomic conditions and context, including levels of employment/unemployment, business health/longevity, and collaborative capacity, among others. During stakeholder interviews, researchers highlighted the following concerns, priorities, and questions to consider:

- **Young growth transition:** There is a lack of agreement among stakeholders regarding how to define the transition – specifically in defining a clear start/end date – and the process for planning for the transition (e.g., collaborative or agency-led).
- **Wood products industry:** There was also a lack of alignment regarding the scope and scale of a future wood products industry, understanding that there has been mixed success with young growth markets.
- **Community health:** Overall the social and economic impacts on communities was noted as a high concern, mentioning that many communities are already facing challenges, including mental health issues, substance use, and workforce capacity.
- **Contrasting local versus broader interests:** Some interviewees noted the contrasting viewpoints and interests of organizations and individuals advocating at the national level versus the needs and interests of those locally.

While these larger questions remain to be answered, the USFS is moving forward with project and sale planning and implementation, including young growth timber sales. These include: Good Neighbor Authority projects, such as the sales at Kosciusko and Vallenar, totaling 34 million board feet of young growth; and integrated resource projects, such as the Prince of Wales and Central Tongass Landscape Level Assessments and the South Revilla Integrated Resource Project. The USFS has also continued with its small sale program, providing timber to low volume – high value operations, important to communities such as Tenakee, Wrangell, Petersburg, Hoonah, and many on Prince of Wales Island.

QUESTIONS AND TAKEAWAYS

Participants discussed the implications of the young growth transition, and specifically explored the role of collaboration in planning and management. Given that the Prince of Wales (POW) assessment process involved a collaborative group on the island, participants questioned whether a similar collaborative approach had been (or will be) facilitated for the Central Tongass process. The collaborative group on POW was successful because it represented a collection of communities across the island; such a collaborative process has not yet proven successful in the Central Tongass region, however, due to its dispersed geography. Other participants expressed the desire to build a collaborative environment on a project-level basis, so that interested stakeholders can be engaged throughout the planning process (as opposed to only during large-scale planning processes).

REALITIES ON THE GROUND: FORESTRY INVENTORY & MAPPING EFFORTS

One of the primary objectives of the Challenge Cost-Share Agreement was to conduct a comprehensive young growth inventory, particularly on stands of young growth that had reached 55 years or older. Agency, private, and conservation foresters shared and provided interpretations of inventory data, including young growth and old growth forest inventory and initial stream inventory on USFS lands, including implications for land management. Additional information about these inventory efforts can be accessed at the [Tongass Young Growth Inventory Portal](#), a site dedicated to providing stand-level information for stakeholders and decision makers.

A significant amount of inventory maps needed to be corrected to reflect true plots. In the updated mapping, consulting firm Terra Verde is updating data regarding timber types and correcting boundaries of inaccurate maps. This work was done with a combination of on-the ground validation and Light detection and ranging – or LiDAR. This technology uses light pulses from planes overhead to help create more accurate and informative forest modeling. Compared to traditional inventory methods, LiDAR requires much fewer on-the-ground plots to provide measurement for a much larger land base. By measuring total variability, the LiDAR data can provide a direct measurement of the entire forest, offering a broad-scale assessment of thousands of acres at one time. While this approach allows for rapid assessment of forest metrics, it is important to note the tradeoffs in terms of accuracy and specificity (e.g., trees per acre, species type, defects, etc.). LiDAR, therefore, serves as a helpful tool for creating stand boundaries and estimating potential outputs; it does not, however, provide the level of detail needed to be useful in determining whether a stand would be economically viable for harvest.

Through a combined approach of LiDAR and field validation, data was improved for a subset of stands, allowing for more accurate estimates at larger scales. Localized site indices can then be used for growth projections, coupled with an analysis of timber type to mitigate the effects of plot-to-plot variation. Fall-down estimation presents challenges and is not reflected on current maps; this approach has to-date only been implemented on the southern Tongass. To gain a better understanding of how the forest inventory outcomes will translate into young growth sale planning and implementation, the USFS is conducting a Young Growth Suitability Analysis.

This GIS mapping exercise applies current Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines and other directives to historical harvest areas to determine availability of future harvest acres. To-date this analysis has been conducted on approximately 12,000 acres, with an initial focus on young growth stands 55 years or older in Craig, Thorne Bay and Ketchikan Ranger Districts. Initial analysis of these areas indicates an operability level of 54% – in other words, 46% of the total acreage is expected to be “fall-down acres” or areas that are not operable. In this example, it equates to a loss of approximately 5,500 acres due to Standards, Guidelines, and other directives.

QUESTIONS AND TAKEAWAYS

Participants discussed the potential implications of the inventory outcomes, and the inherent tradeoffs associated with different approaches to the transition to primarily young growth-based management. Specifically, some participants discussed the tradeoffs of economic value – if the goal is to maximize *absolute volume*, the better harvest strategy is to wait for continued growth; if the goal is *near-term economic impact*, however, the better approach is to harvest sooner, even if it results in reduced volume at the time of harvest. Participants also questioned the timing and approach to applying the inventory data to planning and implementation. Given the time lag between the planning process and actual sale outcomes, some participants recommended that the best approach to the transition is to seek the highest value for old growth, with a focus on maintaining a viable industry in the near-term.



Photo Credit: Paul Hackenmueller

COMMUNITY FORESTRY: BEST PRACTICES FOR LANDSCAPE-LEVEL PLANNING & HOLISTIC FOREST MANAGEMENT

Current landscape-level community planning processes, including the Hoonah Native Forest Partnership (HNFP), Keex' Kwaan Community Forest Partnership (KKCFP), and Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Initiative, are examples of collaborative planning and land management processes piloted by regional stakeholders following the TAC process. These multi-stakeholder initiatives include representation from a variety of landowners and interested stakeholders beyond the USFS, including: tribal corporations (e.g., Huna Totem, Sealaska, Kake Tribal) and tribal associations (e.g., Hoonah Indian Association); villages and municipalities (City of Hoonah, Organized Village of Kake); state government agencies (e.g., Alaska Department of Fish & Game); and nonprofit and private organizations (e.g., The Nature Conservancy, Ecotrust), among others.

While each community planning process is unique, panelists shared common lessons learned across the initiatives, including the need for community engagement, landowner buy-in to the process and willingness to implement management decisions, and training and hiring of local crews. Panelists acknowledged that maintaining a focus on building local capacity is critical to enabling community participation in land management, yet turnover, recruitment and retention posed challenges, particularly in the earlier years of partnership development. These partnerships present an opportunity to pair new technology (e.g. LiDAR) with traditional methods to better understand the landscape with fewer person hours, while building capacity of local crews.

Partnership representatives acknowledged the following factors as central to success of the initiatives:

- Begin with community engagement;
- Hire a full-time coordinator and project manager;
- Delineate expectations and responsibilities;
- Engage meaningfully with community members; and
- Plan for longevity.

As evidenced by the launch of the KKCFP, each new collaborative initiative is able to build on the lessons learned by existing partnerships to better anticipate challenges and develop strategies for success. For example, the technical skills training components of the HNFP and KKCFP are strong, but the overall programs can be strengthened through enhanced soft skills capacity development.

QUESTIONS AND TAKEAWAYS

Participants acknowledged the importance of building the capacity of a local workforce, not only providing employment, but also empowering crew members to grow into community leaders. Others emphasized the importance of continued skill-building to allow for year-round employment and project leadership.

EMPLOYING SOUTHEAST: WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT & SUSTAINABLE ECONOMICS

Through the Sustainable Southeast Partnership, a diverse network of organizations and individuals working together to reach cultural, ecological, and economic prosperity for Southeast Alaska, workforce development initiatives have increasingly gained traction and attention throughout the region. Panelists shared insights into a variety of workforce development initiatives, many of which were supported by the Challenge Cost-Share Agreement. Common themes across workforce development initiatives included the power of interconnection, collaboration, and strong partnerships.

Since 2016, several forestry/natural resource trainings have been hosted on Prince of Wales Island to grow capacity in a local workforce to accomplish inventory and other work associated with the young growth transition. Emphasis was initially on data collection for the USFS, and, more recently, was re-envisioned and expanded to include data collection and analysis on surrounding lands. In addition to trainings focused on forest inventory, panelists emphasized the importance of building a transferable skillset among trainees that goes beyond timber-relevant trades. Since the forest is important to communities in more ways than just timber, such trainings could help stabilize local economies, while keeping communities tied to the land.

"It's about protecting what's important to us – a healthy landscape for fish and other animals." – Tony Christianson, Hydaburg Cooperative Association

While these pilot programs have been able to put community members on a career path, panelists acknowledged the significant hurdles that remain, offering opportunities to enhance future workforce development efforts. Specifically, “soft skills” continue to be lacking among the workforce in rural communities. Increased “life skills” programming may lead to better retention rates among local crews in the future. In addition, although panelists acknowledged the value of cross-training participants to encompass a wider range of skillsets, these approaches to training are not currently being offered. Community forest projects (such as HNFP or KKCFP) present a natural vehicle for workforce development opportunities, as they encapsulate a multi-year program of work that incorporates a variety of skills and subject areas.

QUESTIONS AND TAKEAWAYS

Participants discussed challenges and opportunities for future workforce development training and capacity-building, including the following:

- **Start early.** There is an opportunity to start integrating this programming into high school curricula. This could be particularly valuable for the development of critical life skills that will be applicable regardless of line of work.
- **Leverage existing efforts.** Previous successes in workforce training could be leveraged for future funding and resources – this could include funding for trainings, as well as offer a communication platform for previous trainees to find career opportunities.
- **Cater training to current needs.** Forest partnership such as the HNFP and KKCFP offer the ability to explore current and future workforce needs – specifically by offering workforce trainings that directly align with the needs identified through the partnership efforts.
- **Recognize the less tangible benefits.** Beyond workforce development and job attainment, such trainings also offer opportunities for relationship-building. For example, these trainings have created working relationships between tribal communities, tribal corporations, and the USFS that had not previously existed.

Participants also discussed specific opportunities for future trainings and employment prospects, including those outlined in the following table.

| Workforce Development Priorities and Opportunities | |
|--|---|
| Future Trainings | Employment Opportunities |
| Coordinate with and/or adapt existing trainings, such as the Fire Academy or the ABC Faller Curriculum | Federal and state agency seasonal positions, such as field technicians, fish surveying/sampling, road and trail maintenance, etc. |
| Offer college credit(s) and/or regional certification as an incentive for completing training(s) | Precommercial thinning, including administrative work and field crews |
| Integrate computer technology training, including GIS, LiDAR, drones, etc. | Industry jobs, including timber industry, as well as others, such as the growing visitor industry |
| | Cultural and heritage resources, including improved efforts to integrate agency programming with local tribes and considering needs of village corporations |

YOUNG GROWTH: MARKETS, MANUFACTURING, & OTHER CREATIVE OPPORTUNITIES

An overview of the economic context of the timber industry, young growth manufacturing and export opportunities framed a discussion around case studies from the Lower 48, pilot projects for manufacturing young growth at scale, opportunities associated with timber residuals and woody biomass, and the role of carbon markets in providing supplementary income from the forest.

A case study of small mills from a state in the contiguous US provided a reference point for the industry in Southeast Alaska. In general, “low value” markets are challenging, even where supply of timber is not – specifically, there are costs associated with gaining access, pulp and paper demand is decreasing, and biomass energy has become less competitive as wind, solar, and natural gas gain traction. Beyond these general impediments, Southeast Alaska also faces unique challenges associated with transportation costs, high-risk investment, unstable/interrupted timber supply, and unfavorable regulatory conditions for accessing foreign markets.

To offset these challenges, one important factor is the availability and proximity of residual markets and outlets for multiple species and log sizes. In the Lower 48, such access is key to making many small mills economically successful. There is a plethora of opportunities to better utilize forest residuals and biomass in-region. For example, Southeast Island School District manages 6,500 square feet of biomass heated greenhouses year-round. To meet current local demand, Viking Lumber manufactures bio-bricks from its mill residuals and a number of small operators source wood chips and commercial cordwood. Bio-char and commercial pellet production may be areas to explore for future opportunities.

There is opportunity to consider additional value-add manufacturing capability in the region. While it is not an easy endeavor to make successful, newer technologies may show promise (hew-saw, for example). Additionally, displacing some of the commodity lumber shipped from Canada may be an opportunity to build a value-added young growth industry. Margins are tight for mill operators in Southeast Alaska, however, so many are hesitant to face the risks associated with a timber sale, let alone retrofit their operations – small miscalculations can be very costly.

A recent small-scale young growth milling project on Prince of Wales Island served as a pilot for future young growth sales, harvesting a small 65-year-old stand. As a demonstration project rather than a tradition timber sale, the project focused on applying co-intent standards to achieve multiple benefits. Faced with logs covered in knots, operators had to be very targeted about how to cut the material to retain the highest value of the product. Though the margins were thin, the timber sold as quickly as it could be milled, indicating that there is demand for young growth lumber, if the price is right.

Some local landowners have explored the role the market for carbon offsets can play in supplementing income for private landowners. While promising for larger landowners (e.g., Sealaska), acreage available to smaller landowners may be inadequate to pull together a project.

QUESTIONS AND TAKEAWAYS

Participants discussed additional challenges facing the young growth timber industry in the region:

- **Additional costs associated with export:** In addition to tariffs that exporters must face, logging companies must also face costs associated with phytosanitary certification.
- **Backlog of forest management needs:** To ensure a viable future supply of young growth, landowners must consider management needs, specifically pre-commercial thinning needs for previously harvested stands.

When asked about opportunities to improve the forest economy in the region, participants brought forward the following ideas:

- **Pilot projects:** Pilot projects can offer a lower risk option to showcase what is possible working with young growth. Some participants suggested a pilot milling project to help expand local mill capacity, while another suggestion highlighted opportunities for pilot planting projects for selective species planting on high productivity sites.
- **Sale planning:** Participants discussed several ideas regarding sale planning, including a desired outcome of having a range of sales to meet the needs of local industry, ranging from small-scale opportunities for smaller mills to long-term contracts for larger operations. To be successful, participants suggested the USFS continue its stand-typing efforts to determine the best rotation for each stand, and then use that information to determine a sale schedule for 2020-2027 followed by 15 year sales plans (addressing the “wall of wood”).
- **Capacity development:** Recognizing the challenges associated with mills transitioning to processing young growth, some participants suggested that an investment in the wood products lab would be worthwhile, to help identify products and markets. Others suggested that there is a need to attract entrepreneur support for small local mills, in order to bring in the capital and creative energy needed for the transition.
- **Meeting market needs:** Participants explored various opportunities for meeting market needs, including sustainability certification for lumber harvested from the Tongass (e.g., Sustainable Forestry Initiative, Forest Stewardship Council), strength-test studies for second growth products, and engaging local building codes to be more aligned with local wood products. Other participants made the suggestion to consider the needs of alternative industries in the region – for example, while tourism and logging may seem at odds, there are infrastructure needs of the tourism industry that could be filled by local timber industry (e.g., boat docks, trail signs, etc.).

IDENTIFYING TANGIBLE OPPORTUNITIES: TABLETOP DISCUSSIONS & ACTION ITEMS

The final day of the Symposium was an opportunity for ad hoc working/discussion groups to coalesce around topics of interest to begin identifying needs, challenges, and opportunities around critical issues needing attention to further the development of a healthy forest and healthy forest economy. The working groups and action items are included below.

TECHNICAL INFORMATION AND DATA NEEDS

A small group worked together to identify specific technical and data needs, identifying the near-term priorities as mapping corrections associated with the young growth inventory, accelerating the fall-down analysis (for both old and young growth stands), and leveraging the Challenge Cost-Share Agreement as the basis for future funding allocations. Within these broad topic areas, participants from this group prioritized the following specific activities:

- **Completion of young growth stand-typing** and integration of stand-typing with activity layers. Participants emphasized the importance of stand-typing for estimating what different stands will be able to produce. To do this effectively, it may require efforts to modernize the GIS system, using new data to build new maps that are georeferenced and more detailed than historical cover type maps used by the USFS.
- **Continuation of old growth inventory efforts**, with the goal of gaining a solid understanding of the reality on-the-ground for old growth supply and how to most strategically offer existing old growth during the young growth ramp-up period. This may include activities such as use of LiDAR and on-the-ground data to solidify estimates of volume, fall-down, available acres, and spatial distribution.
- **Identify future LiDAR needs.** LiDAR can be used to improve and streamline stream inventory efforts, ultimately leading to a dataset that the USFS can use in its work. Participants suggested that near-term LiDAR data acquisition could focus on geographic areas surrounding Shelter Cove, Revilla Island, and Ketchikan.
- **Check status of infrastructure inventory.** In addition to the forest inventory efforts, it will be important to have a clear understanding of existing forest infrastructure and maintenance needs, for example roads and log transfer facilities.

ALTERNATIVE FUTURES

A group of participants hosted a conversation exploring “alternative futures” for the region, including alternative industries and economic opportunities. The basis for the discussion was to consider: *What if we cannot maintain the existing industry through the transition to young growth? What might we do in this alternative future?* The goal was to encourage stakeholders to stretch the conception of what a forest economy may look like.

During their discussion, participants emphasized the importance of still considering the role of a timber industry, and broad values associated with the industry. For example, they encouraged others to consider and recognize the value of past logging infrastructure, specifically roads, to provide community benefits. They also explored what a young growth industry may entail, landing on a vision of an industry that focuses on milling for local consumption. In this vision, there would be an island-based paradigm for the young growth industry – in other words, there would be several communities with small mills based on the side of the land base that they have access to. They suggested that this would remove the need to connect to commodity markets and would reduce or remove the associated transportation costs. As next steps, the group recommended the following:

1. **Conduct an economic analysis of non-timber/non-cash values** of a young growth industry under an island-based system (as described above).
2. **Consider alternatives to the timber target formula**, in which it is more reflective of non-cash values from the forest and milling infrastructure, and divides the targets based on micro- and small-sale, medium/mid-range sales, and the large-scale program.
3. **Grow and enhance the existing micro-sale program** and address implementation challenges for mills and operators.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

One small group of participants continued the discussion of workforce development needs and opportunities. To begin the conversation, they rehashed some challenges and concerns identified earlier in the event, including year-to-year uncertainty for job prospects, non-permanent positions that lead to a lack of retention, and lengthy and cumbersome hiring and training processes. They went on to identify workforce needs and opportunities, regarding the topic-areas and specific tasks that need support as well as opportunities for translating those needs into reliable jobs for a local workforce. These needs and opportunities are summarized in the table below.

| Workforce Needs | Opportunities |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Road and trail maintenance | Partnerships and agreements (e.g., agency-to-agency, public-private) |
| Invasive species management | Mid- to small-scale 8A contracting |
| Cultural/heritage resources | Village corporation shareholder hiring |
| Pre-commercial thinning | Student Conservation Association (and other volunteer-based programs) |
| Forestry/fisheries technicians | Funding momentum based on progress to-date |
| Visitor industry | |

LOCAL TRAINING AND RESOURCE ACADEMIES

Building on workforce development discussions, one small group identified specific opportunities for continued training. Specifically, they explored the future of resource academies, including the needs (in terms of substantive topics) and opportunities to provide the training through local resources. They identified the Prince of Wales Vocational-Technical (Voc-Tech) Center in Klawock as a local resource that could (and should) be utilized more broadly as a technical education center for Southeast Alaska. A high-level plan for the center is included below.

1. **Design teaching modules.** Modules could include week-long classes (meeting 8 hours/day) that fit a topic-specific series of training. For example, a recreation series could include trainings such as chainsaw and/or small heavy equipment operator, trail building and maintenance, infrastructure repair and construction (e.g., picnic tables, shelters), wilderness management and best practices, and heritage resource surveys, among others.
2. **Increase visibility of programming to local and regional employers.** Participants suggested that the Voc-Tech programming could serve as a “jobs clearinghouse” for USFS and other land managers. Ideally, the modules could be aligned with upcoming job openings.
3. **Provide college credit and/or certification to students.** Participants discussed the value of providing college credit and/or some form of trade certification for completing the training modules. One key certification need was computer/technology training, specifically for GIS and/or drone technology.
4. **Incorporate “soft skills” training.** In addition to substance-specific training modules, the Voc-Tech program could also include mentoring, resume-building, and soft skills training. These trainings could be ideal for the fall/winter terms, given the limited field season.
5. **Identify operational funding.** Participants discussed that while the Voc-Tech program already exists and could be a natural partner for trainings, the key challenge will be securing long-term operational funding.



Photo Credit: Paul Hackenmueller

PRE-COMMERCIAL THINNING

Elevating the priority level of pre-commercial thinning (PCT) work across the Tongass arose as a critical issue over the course of the symposium. A working group discussion centered on the current reality, needs, opportunities, and next steps for a PCT program. Currently there are approximately 85,000 acres on the Tongass that are in the ideal age-class window for PCT treatment, but each year more stands age out of this window, making treatments less effective. The group identified the need of dealing with this “thinning backlog” as a first priority, ultimately thinning up to 6,000-8,000 acres per year to get caught up with needs. Such an approach, they argued, could speed the transition significantly. The group identified the following next steps to proceed with addressing PCT needs on the forest.

1. **Create a multi-stakeholder task force** to prioritize the needs and develop a plan. Suggestions for membership include representatives from environmental/conservation entities, tribal corporations (e.g., Sealaska), Alaska Forest Association, political leadership (e.g., staff from Senator Lisa Murkowski’s office), and government agencies, specifically a representative from the Office of Acquisitions Management.
2. **Identify business management opportunities and policy recommendations.** Participants identified that the current acquisitions management process is ineffective, particularly due to the current processes and uncertain business environment in the region. Moving forward, participants recommended developing a consistent business model so contractors can be sure of what to expect in the process. This discussion would also necessitate considerations for foreign workers and visa-card holders – in Washington, workers may transfer to Oregon with their current visa, but the policy does not allow for transfers to Alaska. This process could be improved to be more streamlined and transferable.

PARTNERSHIPS AND CHALLENGE COST-SHARE 3.0

To help make progress on the ideas and opportunities discussed throughout the Symposium, a small group of participants discussed the utility of a new Challenge Cost-Share Agreement that would build on the work of the first two agreements. Participants identified the following as potential funding priorities for such an agreement (in no particular order).

- **Partnerships and collaboration:** Participants identified the need to continue to nourish current relationships and institutionalize and stabilize collaborative groups in the region. This may include renewing the Tongass Transition Collaborative to encourage participation by existing members and adding new partners/members where additional expertise is needed.
- **Workforce development and business innovation:** Participants of this small group did not provide detail on workforce development priorities, but rather suggested that a future Challenge Cost-Share Agreement could support the priorities identified throughout the Symposium with regards to workforce development and training. In addition, they also identified the need to support business innovation for small mills, and possibly even convene an incubator program for entrepreneurs interested in investing in Southeast Alaska.
- **Data analysis and assessment:** In addition to inventory and other technical data analysis, participants also identified needs for conducting a demand analysis for timber demand and an economic impact assessment that factors in other economic drivers in Southeast Alaska, as well as barriers or tradeoffs associated with various economic models.
- **Wood utilization:** As young growth stands become available, participants suggested it will be important to review a prospectus approach to utilization of early young growth sales. Participants also emphasized the role of lumber grading in determining possible markets and utilization. They also identified the opportunity of a vacant mill located in Thorne Bay – perhaps it could be purchased to provide local manufacturing.
- **Additional forest management priorities:** While there are quite a few near-term priorities to address, specifically with regards to young growth management, participants emphasized the importance of looking toward the TAC recommendations to determine what tasks remain to be implemented. In addition, there are other restoration needs to keep in mind, for example maintaining failing fish passages throughout the forest.

CONCLUSION

The 2019 Southeast Alaska Forestry Symposium offered the opportunity for participants to learn about the current status of young growth throughout the Tongass, and to discuss opportunities for improving health of the region – environmentally, socially, and economically. While external political pressures can detract from a focus on tangible opportunities and on-the-ground management, this event offered dedicated time to focus on the latter – how to address on-the-ground challenges to implement needed changes. In follow-up to the event, several stakeholders will likely continue to work together to make progress in the region.

APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT LIST

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