

Pre-Commercial Thinning: Improving Young Growth Forests through Effective Management

Executive Summary

The Tongass National Forest, once home to a thriving old growth timber industry, now faces the challenge of managing previously harvested stands in a way that ensures healthy young growth forests. Pre-commercial thinning (PCT) is an essential management approach – it facilitates earlier economical timber sale opportunities and wildlife habitat benefits that provide critical subsistence resources for Southeast Alaskans. However, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) is currently unable to address these thinning needs at scale: 85,000 acres are in need of thinning, and the PCT program needs to treat 6,000 - 8,000 acres per year to keep up, but the thinning rate now is only a fraction of that amount.

In 2020, the State of Alaska convened the PCT Task Force to develop recommendations to improve implementation of the PCT program on the Tongass. The Task Force, which was facilitated by Meridian institute, identified the following recommendations as top priorities. The full set of recommendations may be found in the report.



1. CONTRACTING MECHANISMS AND APPROACHES

Following changes to contracting approaches in the region, the pool of available PCT contractors declined precipitously. Suggested changes aim to increase the number of eligible contractors by issuing a variety of contract sizes and types.

Priority recommendation:

- **Continue work that is already underway to develop a more diverse array of contracting mechanisms and ensure these priorities remain as contracting authority shifts to the national level.** Implementation will require a strong working relationship among US Forest Service Region 10 leadership and the office of acquisitions management (AQM).



3. LABOR FORCE AND AVAILABLE CONTRACTING BASE

Given the significant need for consistent PCT projects at scale, the contracting base will need to expand to include contractors from other regions of the country with a workforce that includes migrant workers.

Priority recommendation:

- **Amend the H2-B visa program to allow migrant workers to work in Alaska and the contiguous United States.** The forestry and timber sectors will be essential to provide backing for these changes.



2. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR STANDARDS

Contractors in Southeast Alaska face the unique challenge of ensuring worker health and safety in remote temporary field camps. Suggested changes seek to increase understanding of and compliance with current standards, as well as offer options for flexibility in enforcement for remote settings.

Priority recommendations:

- **Pursue an agreement between the US Forest Service and Department of Labor regarding labor standards and specific guidance for worker conditions at remote field sites.**
- **Conduct virtual trainings with agency staff and contractors regarding compliance with Department of Labor standards.**



4. THINNING PRIORITIZATION AND FINANCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Land managers have developed thinning priorities based on ecological needs, but contracting limitations, access to housing, and budget allocations limit the USFS's ability to complete PCT projects. The cost of PCT has risen precipitously while the amount of funding allocated for the program has remained stagnant.

Priority recommendation:

- **Develop cost estimates and budget priorities that reflect the true cost of PCT,** including temporary labor camps that meet health and safety requirements, transportation costs of accessing remote locations, and providing fair wages (including overtime) for workers.