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U.S. Forest Service announces intent to modify Tongass National Forest management plan to advance transition, support forest industry

Release Date: Oct 1, 2013 Ketchikan, AK

Contact(s): **Tricia O'Connor, Deputy Forest Supervisor**

KETCHIKAN, Alaska, Oct. 1, 2013—The U.S. Forest Service has determined that it will begin a public process with the intent of modifying the Tongass National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan), based on conditions on the land and demands of the public. Among other things, the modification is expected to focus on identifying the timber base suitable to support a transition to young-growth management, in a way that supports the continued viability of the forest industry in Southeast Alaska, per the direction of Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack.

According to Forest Supervisor Forrest Cole, "while the nature of those modifications is determined, the Tongass will continue an annual program of work, which includes the mix of projects and delivery of goods and services that are guided by the Forest Plan, in order to advance the transition and support forest industry."

The largest reserve in the National Forest System, the 17-million-acre Tongass in Southeast Alaska is currently operating under the 2008 Forest Plan. The current 5-Year Review of the Tongass Forest Plan is mandated under the National Forest Management Act of 1976, which requires periodic assessments of management plans to determine whether modifications are necessary to clarify or adjust the direction of forest management.

The Forest Service solicited comments through public and stakeholder meetings, government-to-government consultation with Southeast Alaska tribes, and written comments. Cole received input on a range of topics, including young-growth management, the Roadless Rule, watershed restoration, mining, renewable energy, and local economies.

As a result of both the 5-Year Review and a July memorandum from the Secretary of Agriculture, Addressing Sustainable Forestry in Southeast Alaska, a Tongass Federal Advisory Committee will be established to provide advice on identifying ways to support the transition and provide for a viable forest industry in Southeast Alaska. Initiation of the Committee is expected in early 2014.

Advice from the Committee may include a recommendation to define the suitable timber base to support the transition and to bolster implementation of a young-growth timber supply.

For more information, contact Tricia O'Connor, Deputy Forest Supervisor, **(907) 228-6200 or poconnor@fs.fed.us**.

The Tongass Forest Plan and 5-Year Review documents are online at <http://1.usa.gov/15FCWGI>. The USDA Secretary's memo can be found at <http://1.usa.gov/1eUSNKG>; the related news release is at <http://1.usa.gov/12GeIht>.

****EDITOR'S NOTE: DUE TO FEDERAL GOVERNMENT SHUTDOWN, COMMUNICATION IS SUSPENDED UNTIL USUAL GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS HAVE RESUMED****

Alerts & Warnings

- ⚠ **HARVEST LIMIT FOR DEER ON LINDENBERG PENINSULA REDUCED FOR THE 2013 SEASON**
- ⚠ **Blue Lake Road closures - Sitka District**

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20250

July 2, 2013

SECRETARY'S MEMORANDUM 1044-009
Addressing Sustainable Forestry in Southeast Alaska

1. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

Alaska's Tongass National Forest is a national treasure. At 17 million acres, the Tongass includes vast old growth temperate rainforests that are increasingly rare globally. The Tongass is also a place that has sustained the people and communities of Southeast Alaska for generations. Whether through providing food and other subsistence uses to the rural communities in the region, supporting cultural practices and identity, drawing people to the region for world-class recreation and fishing, or supporting wood products and other forest-based industries, the Tongass is vital to the economic and cultural well-being of the region. The Forest is also important to the climate; while the Tongass comprises about 2 percent of the Nation's forests, according to one scientific study it contains the equivalent of 8 percent of the carbon sequestered in the forests of the conterminous United States. The Department of Agriculture is committed to maintaining Southeast Alaska's exceptional natural resources in perpetuity. USDA is equally committed to doing its part to ensure that the communities within and adjacent to the Tongass National Forest are economically vibrant. These two goals must go hand in hand.

To conserve the Tongass National Forest under the principles of the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960, Tongass Timber Reform Act and other relevant statutes, we must speed the transition away from old-growth timber harvesting and towards a forest industry that utilizes second growth – or young growth – forests. Moreover, we must do this in a way that preserves a viable timber industry that provides jobs and opportunities for residents of Southeast Alaska.

This Memorandum affirms that this transition to a more ecologically, socially, and economically sustainable forest management is a high priority for USDA, the Forest Service, and the Tongass National Forest. USDA's goal is to effectuate this transition over the next 10 to 15 years, so that at the end of this period the vast majority of timber sold by the Tongass will be young growth. This timeframe will conserve old growth forests while allowing the forest industry time to adapt. To achieve this goal, several steps must be taken as described in the Actions section of this Memorandum.

Over the past three years, USDA has increased investments in alternative economic development opportunities for communities across the region in the recreation, tourism, fishing and renewable energy sectors, while initiating a transition away from a historical reliance on old growth timber harvests. To accomplish the transition to a timber program based primarily on young growth, it is important to retain the expertise and infrastructure of the existing industry so businesses can quickly re-tool. These businesses are fundamental to both the young growth and restoration components of the future timber program, and to the economic vitality of the region. Such an approach requires a reliable supply of economically viable timber, with the old growth component decreasing over time while the young growth component increases.

Updated forest inventories have improved our understanding of the age, location, and amount of young growth across the Tongass, and helped clarify the challenges in establishing an economically viable young growth program due to the relatively young age of the available stands, market conditions, and other factors. Additional research will be necessary to develop effective ways to meet these challenges. Achieving the transition in 10 to 15 years also calls for enactment of a statutory provision, to exempt a limited amount of young growth on the Tongass from current requirements that generally restrict harvesting young growth timber until it reaches maximum growth rates. Administrative mechanisms to accomplish such an adjustment are time consuming and would divert scarce resources from achieving the goals of the transition. Compared to private lands, the Culmination of Mean Annual Increment (CMAI) requirements could delay development of an economically viable young growth program for decades. USDA will continue to work with Congress on such a provision.

To ensure a smooth transition, the Forest Service will continue to offer a supply of old growth timber while increasing the supply of young growth to provide industry in Alaska the opportunity to develop new markets, learn new skills, and acquire new equipment. The continuation of limited sales of old growth timber is essential to maintain the existing industry until young growth can efficiently be processed. The Forest Service will also continue the Tongass National Forest's micro-sale program and the old growth small sale program that targets niche markets, while developing a new integrated program of work focused on young growth, ecological restoration, and forest stewardship that protects and restores the Forest's extraordinary fish and wildlife habitat. This strategy will maintain and restore the Forest's clean water, abundant fish, healthy populations of wildlife, and scenic beauty while sustaining deep-rooted community and cultural ties to the land and providing jobs in the woods.

Through an all lands, all hands approach USDA will utilize all of its expertise, tools and resources such as economic assistance, workforce training, capacity building, and improved delivery of services to help strengthen and diversify local economies. Working with Rural Development and the Farm Service Agency; other Federal agencies as appropriate; State, local, and Tribal entities; non-governmental organizations; and local communities will be essential to success. Collaborative development of a transition strategy increases collective ownership of the approach; collaborative implementation with our many partners offers opportunities to leverage funding available from the Forest Service.

2. ACTIONS

The objective of this Secretarial Memorandum is to ensure that USDA, the Chief of the Forest Service, the Alaska Region of the Forest Service, and the Tongass National Forest work together to catalyze a transition from a timber sale program based on old growth to one based on young growth. Pursuant to this Memorandum, the Secretary asks the Forest Service to:

- a. Seek opportunities to supply sufficient old growth "bridge timber" while the industry re-tools for processing young growth. The first step is the Big Thorne timber sale. This project along with other planned timber sales would supply timber to existing mills for several years and allow the Forest Service to reallocate staff to young growth projects.
- b. As soon as possible, allocate staff and financial resources to planning young growth projects, ramping down old growth sales and increasing investments in young growth.
- c. Continue to work with Congress to exempt a limited amount of young growth on the Tongass from current requirements that generally restrict harvesting young growth timber until it has reached maximum growth rates, or CMAI. Providing flexibility with regard to CMAI is essential to permit the development of economically viable young growth projects within the timeframe set as a goal for the transition.

- d. Develop by July 30, 2013, scenarios that effectuate a more rapid transition by prioritizing and developing additional young growth and restoration projects that could be completed over the next 5 years. Examine scenarios that assume adoption of the statutory provision noted above that provides Forest Service greater flexibility in harvesting young growth timber.
- e. Strongly consider whether to pursue an amendment to the Tongass Forest Plan. Such an amendment would evaluate which lands will be available for timber harvest, especially young growth timber stands, which lands should be excluded, and additional opportunities to promote and speed transition to young growth management. A determination of whether to initiate an amendment should be completed by September 30, 2013. If an amendment is pursued, identify an efficient timeline for completion that supports the timeframe for transition outlined in this Memorandum.
- f. Continue support for research on how best to manage young growth, develop markets for it, and help industry re-tool to process it. As results become available, apply them as needed to improve young growth management.
- g. Intensify work with Rural Development to pursue opportunities to facilitate investments in re-tooling. Develop by December 31, 2013, in collaboration with Rural Development and other stakeholders, a plan for providing financial assistance to re-tool timber processing equipment in Southeast Alaska to assist the industry to efficiently handle young growth timber.
- h. Pursue partnerships with foundations, non-profits, corporations, and others to advance a second growth industry, undertake restoration projects, and otherwise speed the transition.

I will remain engaged in this effort to ensure the Tongass National Forest transitions effectively to a timber program based primarily on young growth. It is vital that the Forest Service continue to seek input from and work with stakeholders in the region towards this transition. In this regard, I will approve establishment of an advisory committee under the Federal Advisory Committee Act to provide advice to the Forest Service on how to expedite the transition to young growth management.

3. MISCELLANEOUS

- a. Effective Date. July 1, 2013
- b. This Memorandum does not create any right or benefit, substantive or procedural enforceable by law or equity. This Memorandum creates no private right of action.