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## 1. **FORESTS:** Tongass management plan would bring wasteful logging, groups say

Arthur O'Donnell, *Land Letter* editor

As the U.S. Forest Service completes its latest round of collecting public comments on a revised land management plan for the Tongass National Forest, environmental groups are again taking issue with projections for timber from the southeastern Alaskan forest. According to the Wilderness Society, a revised timber demand forecast recently issued by the Forest Service merely repeats the same errors and assumptions used in a flawed 1997 projection.

In response to a challenge by environmentalists, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals told the agency to revise its market demand figures. While the land management plan involves much more than just timber sales on the 16.8 million acres of forest and wilderness lands, the revisions largely relate to aspects of the timber plan that the court found to be in error, with the result of doubling the expected market demand previously projected.



Environmentalists fear a return to clear cutting in the Tongass National Forest under a proposed land management plan. Photo courtesy of the Southeast Alaska Conservation Coalition.

Currently about 2.5 million acres are designated for timber production, while 91 percent of the forest is a roadless area, with 5.7 million acres designated as wilderness or wilderness national monuments.

The new timber demand report was formally released as part of an amended draft environmental impact statement in January. It includes four scenarios for market demand for timber sales from the Tongass, ranging from limited production of about 48 million board feet per year to a highly competitive marketplace that would see new mills opening and export of as much as 370 million board feet per year.

The high end of the forecast essentially replicates the figures the Forest Service had previously adopted in its initial plan.

Those scenarios, in turn, were used to formulate the seven alternatives for future land management in the

forest, particularly with regard to opening of inventories roadless areas (IRAs). At the lower end, maintaining nearly all roadless areas in natural condition would not provide enough timber to meet projected demands under any of the four scenarios. But the most aggressive marketplace projection was associated with logging on 40 percent of the IRAs, including more than a quarter of old-growth forests over the next 100 years.

Tongass Forest Supervisor Forrest Cole this week emphasized that he has not chosen a preferred alternative from the various options. "I want to open the door for the broadest possible opportunities for collaboration," Cole said.

Lee Kramer, project manager for the Tongass land management plan EIS, told *Land Letter*, "No one can predict what the timber forecast will be. Our scenarios go from the fairly depressed timber demand all the way to a

turn-around in the industry. At any particular level of demand, we tried to identify the likely impacts on lands."

## A depressed industry

However, according to an analysis commissioned by the Wilderness Society, all of the scenarios used by the Forest Service rely on outdated assumptions about demand for timber. Resource economist Lisa Crone identified three "major flaws" in the timber demand projections:

- They assume that the main driver of demand for Alaskan timber is for exports to other countries on the Pacific Rim. Not only has demand from Asian markets plummeted, Crone wrote, but also most Alaskan timber production goes to domestic markets.
- They fail to recognize that the SE Alaskan timber industry "is in an increasingly marginalized competitive position" characterized by some of the highest costs for logging in the world and a large percentage of low value timber.
- The higher end demand figures assume development of a fully integrated timber industry within the state, even though several economic studies have determined new facilities would not be economically viable.

"The Forest Service has a history of overestimating the market demand for timber sold from national forests," The Wilderness Society argues in comments on the DEIS. "Unfortunately, these new figures continue the Forest Service tradition of presenting exaggerated market demand for timber."

The only reason logging makes sense for timber companies is because of huge federal subsidies, said Russell Heath, executive director of the Southeast Alaska Conservation Coalition, which represent 14 environmental groups in the state. SEACC contends that since 1982, the Tongass timber sales program has cost taxpayers over \$1 billion in subsidies, while returning pennies on the dollar in revenues. In 2005, the group said, the Forest Service spent \$48 million to develop timber sales and construct logging roads in the forest, but received only \$600,000 in timber sales receipts.

Timber sales in the past few years have been less than 50 million board feet annually, Heath told *Land Letter*, reflecting the noncompetitive nature of the local industry. He added that SEACC favors sustainable forest management, including a domestic timber industry that can process logs into finished goods, not simply export them. Still, he said, "the Forest Service is catering to timber industry to the exclusion of others."

The Crone report also identifies consequences of employing a high figure for allowable timber sales, including relaxing environmental protections for old-growth forests, continued road building in pristine areas, cutting of the highest value trees while leaving less valuable trees behind, degradation of watersheds, and continued subsidization.

In addition, she wrote, "communities of SE Alaska will continue to believe their economic fortunes are tied to an industry which has serious competitive disadvantages, is in serious decline and has little hope of recovery. These communities should be warned of these economic realities, so they may make informed and rational decisions about where their true future economic opportunities lay."

## Electronic hearing set

The Forest Service this week announced it is extending the comment period on the plan to April 30 from April 12. Regional forester Denny Bschor said that continued severe weather throughout the state has forced several districts to reschedule public hearings and comment sessions, including consultations with tribes. Also, the agency this month made some revisions to plans for small, old-growth reserves, and said the extension will allow people to review those changes.

The agency is also trying a new approach to public involvement with an Internet public meeting, today, March 22, from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Alaska Daylight Time. The two-part meeting will include an interactive presentation on the plan and a question-and-answer session, with Forest Service officials answering questions posted electronically. Those questions and responses will be available for viewing in the afternoon session, starting at 2 p.m. ADT.

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