



A new plan for the Tongass National Forest

Pro-development, conservation communities respond to Forest Service's announcement

By Jennifer Canfield

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A Tuesday announcement that the U.S. Forest Service would be modifying its five-year plan for the Tongass National Forest received positive and negative reactions from both the conservation and pro-development communities.

The statement released by the Forest Service was vague, stating that it would modify the plan based on the conditions of the land and the 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.”

Vilsack introduced his Transition Framework for the Tongass in 2010. The plan called for a transition away from old-growth logging within 15 years. In July, Vilsack announced a plan to allocate more resources within the Forest Service to help with that transition. The Forest Service could not be reached to clarify the Tuesday announcement because of the federal government shutdown.

Shelly Wright, executive director for the Southeast Conference, said the decision to modify the plan is bittersweet.

“As long as they’ve opened that up for revision it means that nothing will be happening in the forest until they’ve completed it. Nothing’s been happening, but now it’s official,” Wright said. “With this and the Big Thorne decision, they’ve effectively shut the Tongass down.”

U.S. Forest Service Regional Forester Beth Pendleton recently said that the Forest Service would be reconsidering the Big Thorne sale. Pendleton said that she only recently became aware of

information from wildlife biologist Dr. David K. Person indicating the wolf population on Prince of Wales Island could become endangered or extinct because of old-growth logging related to the Big Thorne sale.

Wright said the upside to the Forest Service modifying its Tongass plan is that it will give the Southeast Conference a chance to sell the agency on their approach to managing the forest.

“The sweet part is that it opens a door for us to present our plan and hopefully get some eyes and ears on a strategy that’s more economically feasible,” Wright said.

At its annual meeting in September, the Southeast Conference unveiled its long-term strategy to manage the forest. Part of the organization’s approach involves lumping “all the available lands into a single land base” that could be managed depending on the resource goals for that area.

Austin Williams, the Alaska forest program manager for Trout Unlimited, said that he is hopeful that the agency will reallocate resources from managing logging in the Tongass to promoting fishing and tourism instead.

“Clearly the Forest Service needs to change the way it does business in Southeast Alaska,” Williams said. “If a modification to the forest plan is what’s needed, then we need to see that happen now.”

Williams said he’d like to see the Forest Service focus more on conservation efforts.

“We’d like to see the Forest Service immediately start allocating its resources to planning a different scope of projects,” Williams said. “Projects that take on watershed restoration needs are one of our priorities.”

The last Tongass five-year plan was approved in 2008. The plan is currently due for revision and renewal.

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