



Forest Service and Mental Health reach Tongass land swap agreement

By [Dan Rudy](#)

[July 16, 2015](#)

The United States Forest Service (USFS) announced the next step has been taken in a land deal with Alaska Mental Health Trust (AMHT), after signing an Agreement to Initiate on June 30.

The agreement as currently envisioned could see the transfer of nearly 40,000 acres of state and federal lands between the two agencies.

For AMHT, the deal will allow it to develop the lands' timber and mineral resources. Founded by Congress in 1956, AMHT is a state corporation set up to assist the state in funding its mental health program. The trust manages lands for revenue generation that support these mental health services, and its assets include timber, coal, oil, gas and minerals. To date, the Trust's resource development has brought \$55 million to the fund.

For USFS, the exchanged lands will become integrated into its Tongass National Forest system, with parcels taking on the usage attributes of adjacent parklands.

AMHT lands to be exchanged under the deal encompass 18,066 acres near the communities of Ketchikan, Wrangell, Meyers Chuck, Petersburg, Sitka and Juneau. The lands are largely old-growth forest, and both the surface and subsurface estates will be transferred as part of the deal.

Parcels to be transferred to the USFS in Wrangell total 1,104 acres, and include 330 acres of upland strips running parallel to Zimovia Highway between Heritage and Shoemaker harbors, 63 acres of land near Shoemaker, and 711 acres around Pats Lake.

In exchange for these lands, USFS will transfer 21,175 acres of federal lands located around Shelter Cove, Naukati, Hollis and Gravina Island. As part of the trade, outstanding rights and research easements will continue to be made available.

The agreement brings to a close a lengthy period of preliminary negotiation, a collaborative process involving not just the two agencies but also community members, tribal organizations and environmental groups. Paul Slenkamp, resource manager with the AMHT Land Office, explained he has been working on the exchange for eight years. But there will still be much work left to do.

"We still have a lot of federal process to go through," he explained.

The agreement is only the 11th step in a list of 64 implementation steps scheduled for the transfer. Next steps include land surveying and preparation of a mineral potential report, with appraisals of the properties to be conducted through the Bureau of Land Management and USFS through next year. The two parties will also prepare to meet National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) guidelines before the deal can be finalized.

"It's a long process," Slenkamp said.

Expected to begin in December 2016, the NEPA process will give the general public and forest users a chance to voice their desires and determine if the exchange will be in the public interest. The process will include a public comment period and draft environmental impact statement and should be finalized by spring 2017. More paperwork will follow, with the land exchange anticipated to be concluded by June 2018.

"We're moving towards there. This is a big step forward," Slenkamp said. "This is really kind of the start of the formal process."

MOST POPULAR:

[COMMENTS](#)

[VIEWED](#)

1. [Downloadable PDF versio...](#)
2. [Wrangell remembers tail...](#)
3. [Deer, elk seasons open ...](#)
4. [School programs readyin...](#)
5. [NOAA issues new guideli...](#)



YOU MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN: