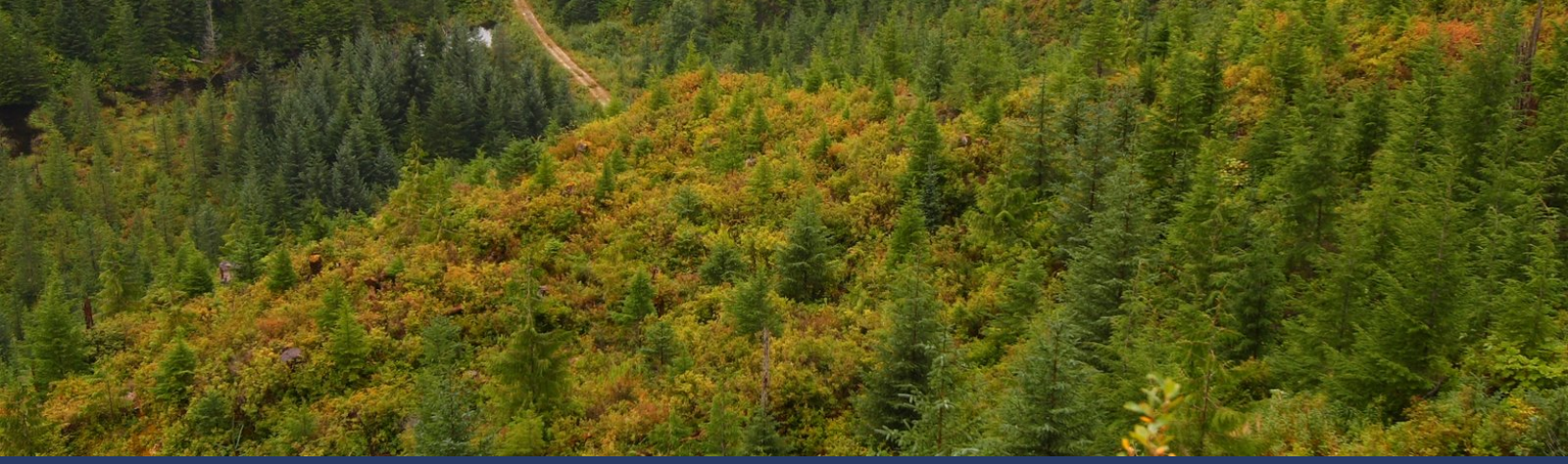


Logging on the Tongass National Forest

by Bretwood Higman, Andrew Mattox, Niki Hoagland, David Coil

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Ground Truth Trekking

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Some terminology used in this article is explained in“Forestry Terminology” (/Issues/Forestry/Forestry-Terminology.html)

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OLD-GROWTH STUMP — Tongass National Forest — Get Photo (/photos/old-growth-stump/)

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Introduction

Logging on the Tongass National Forest (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tongass_National_Forest), the largest U.S. National Forest (considered the “crown jewel” of the National Forest system), occurs predominantly in old growth timber. The current logging industry on the forest is small, federally subsidized, and controversial. In 2010, the Forest Service announced (http://articles.latimes.com/2011/apr/09/nation/la-na-tongass-logging-20110409) a new “Transition Framework” plan in which it would depart from its traditional policy of focusing on large timber sales, develope other sectors, and concentrate its logging policy on small parcel sales to support local industry.

In late 2014, the research organization Headwaters Economics (http://headwaterseconomics.org/) released a highly critical assessment (http://headwaterseconomics.org/wphw/wp-content/uploads/Tongass_Summary.pdf) of Forest Service’s implementation of the “Transition Framework” plan. Ths report found (http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-tongass-forest-service-20141117-story.html) that the majority of Forest Service assets on the Tongass are still devoted to supporting the small logging industry.

Logging proponents argue that federal support of the industry contributes to the economic health and infrastructure development of the region, and that the immense size of the Tongass means that there is plenty of timber to harvest. Critics argue that taxpayer money is being spent to subsidize the

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uneconomical destruction of a rare natural treasure, with most of that destruction occurring in relatively small stocks of lowland timber. This destruction is for the short-term economic gain of an industry that exists in the area largely because of federal subsidies.

The Forest Service itself is following a Congressional mandate to promote the economic development of the region. Its plan to do so, described (http://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5339075.pdf) as an “all hands, all lands plan”, and is heavily funded for logging infrastructure development, timber management, and timber salest.

Old Growth in the Tongass

More than 5 million of the Tongass’s 16.8 million acres (http://tongass-fpadjust.net/Documents/Final_EIS_VolumeI.pdf) (32 MB)are classified as “productive” forests. Nearly all timber logged in the Tongass (and throughout Alaska) is old growth timber.

Tongass old growth	Acres
“Productive” (/Issues/Forestry/Forestry-Terminology.html) old growth	5 to 5.7 million

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Tongass old growth	Acres
Productive old growth eligible for logging	Approx. 600,000
Current lowland old growth (/Issues/Forestry/Forestry-Terminology.html)	380,000
Original lowland old growth (speculative)	500,000
Lowland old growth eligible for logging	110,000
Current volume class 7 (/Issues/Forestry/Forestry-Terminology.html)	82,000
Original volume class 7 (speculative)	160,000 to

250,000
Volume class 7 eligible for logging| 25,000
Current Volume Class 6-7 (/Issues/Forestry/Forestry-Terminology.html)| 566,000
Original volume class 6-7| Unknown
Volume class 6-7 eligible for logging| Not identified

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Contemporary Logging

The logging industry in the Tongass has suffered a major contraction over recent decades. The U.S. Forest Service estimates that there were 3,543 timber related jobs in 1990. However, the Tongass currently only supports a small logging industry. There were an estimated 265 direct timber jobs in 2008 (direct communication from the Tongass National Forest) and the Alaska Audubon society estimates that about 200 jobs remained as of 2011. Logged areas are not replanted in the Tongass, due to the rapid rate of natural reseeding.

2011 Timber Harvest

Acreage Logged:| 1829 acres
Volume Logged:| 31 million board-feet
Type of Harvest| Acreage
Clearcut| 1336
Two-Age Management | 432
Uneven Age| 14
Salvage| 26
Thinning| 21

While the majority of the timber cut is old growth, in recent years there have been several young growth harvests. The fraction of young growth harvested is small: 769 acres, about 9 million board feet, in all years combined. The National Forest

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estimates that it can achieve a sustained timber harvest of 50% young growth by 2026. These data were directly reported to Ground Truth Trekking by the Tongass National Forest.

Logging in the Tongass has been characterized throughout its history by “high grading”, or preferentially cutting the most valuable timber stands. Preferred trees for logging are cedar species and all very large trees. Stands of other timber that would be marketable in other regions of the country are not economically viable to harvest in the Tongass, due to its remote location.

Subsidies & Economics

Estimating the current amount of federal subsidy for Tongass logging is difficult, as the numbers vary based on the criteria used in the calculations. For 2012/13, the Tongass’s “Investment Strategy in Support of Rural Communities in Southeast Alaska” (http://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5339075.pdf) (2.6 MB) document outlines a $25 million forest products budget, with the objective of maintaining the current logging industry. Presuming this $25 million can be considered a subsidy, and given the Alaska Audubon Society’s estimate of 200 current timber jobs; the subsidy is $130,000 per timber job. If a requested increase of $11 million is awarded, it is unclear how many new jobs this would create, or what the economic benefit would be for those already holding timber jobs in the region.

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TONGASS NATIONAL FOREST — Economically nonviable trees — Get Photo (/photos/tongass-national-forest/)

The USFS acknowledges (http://www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass/forest_facts/faqs/forestmgmt.shtml) that the Tongass may be the most expensive national forest in the nation to log in. In published 2004 figures, average costs for logging on the Tongass were $137 per thousand board feet (mbf), and revenues were $42.54 per mbf. The translates to $3.22 spent per $1 recieved. This number did not include the costs of road construction. The Alaska Sierra Club identified (http://alaska.sierraclub.org/images/Taxpayer_Loss__Tongass_timber_sales_4-05_.pdf) the 2004 cost of logging subsidies for the Tongass at $48 million. In 2008, Taxpayers for Common Sense estimated (http://

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www.taxpayer.net/library/article/tongass-timber-plan-plunders-taxpayer-pockets) the 1982-2007 subsidy rate as roughly $40 million / year.

The Tongass is geographically remote from major timber markets, leading to increased logistical and operating costs. Transportation costs are frequently exacerbated by the need to transport logs via ship for milling. Due to the expense of exporting logs to distant markets, many timber sales close without a buyer.

Protected Areas and the Sealaska Land Privatization Bill

Under current law, roughly 4.5 million acres of the Tongass is protected from logging, including roughly 70% of the remaining 82,000 acres of very large old growth, as stated in the National Forest's Resource Management Plan. (32 MB)

Sealaska Native Corporation (http://www.sealaska.com/page/home) is entitled to parcels of Tongass National Forest Lands, under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 (http://www.fws.gov/laws/lawsdigest/ALASNAT.HTML)(ANCSA), as the corporation was not given ownership at the time of all acreage to which it was entitled. There is no clear contest to Sealaska's legal claim to additional lands. Land selections by Sealaska have been subject to intense criticism from conservation organizations, due to Sealaska's past logging activities, and the presence of merchantable old grown on selected lands. Logging

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has been a major source of cash revenues for Sealaska, which have been partly redistributed to shareholders as dividends. Proponents note that the transfer would fulfill ANCSA existing land obligations to the corporation. The land bill has passed through multiple revisions in Congress. As of Jan 1, 2014, its final form is unsettled.

“Roadless” Controversy

Logging road construction in the Tongass is also the subject of controversy. Most roads within the Tongass National Forest are constructed for the purpose of resource extraction, specifically timber. The roads are utilized by for-profit corporations but built at the expense of the Federal government, therefore road construction and maintenance can be construed as a subsidy to logging operations. Due to the nature of the terrain and materials available, road construction in the Tongass is unusually expensive (http://www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass/forest_facts/faqs/forestmgmt.shtml), at roughly $160,000/mile, with peak costs at $500,000/mile.

Although originally subject to the Clinton-era “Roadless Rule” (http://www.fs.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsinternet/!ut/p/c4/04_SB8K8xLLM9MSSzPy8xBz9CP0os3gDfxMDT8MwRydLA1cj72BTFzMTnEg!!?ss=119930&navtype=BROWSEBYSUBJECT&cid=null&navid=151000000000%25202001%2520Roadless%2520Rule), the Tongass was largely exempted from these restrictions in 2003, until they were reinstated by a judge in 2011.

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Further Reading

> Alaska Audubon Report: High-grading on the Tongass National Forest: Implications of Pending Land Selections on Forest Diversity (http://ak.audubon.org/sites/default/files/documents/audubon_s730-hr1408_high-grading_white_paper_-_oct2011_final.pdf)

> Forest Service 2011 Tongass Plan: Investment Strategy in Support of Rural Communities in Southeast Alaska (http://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5339075.pdf)

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