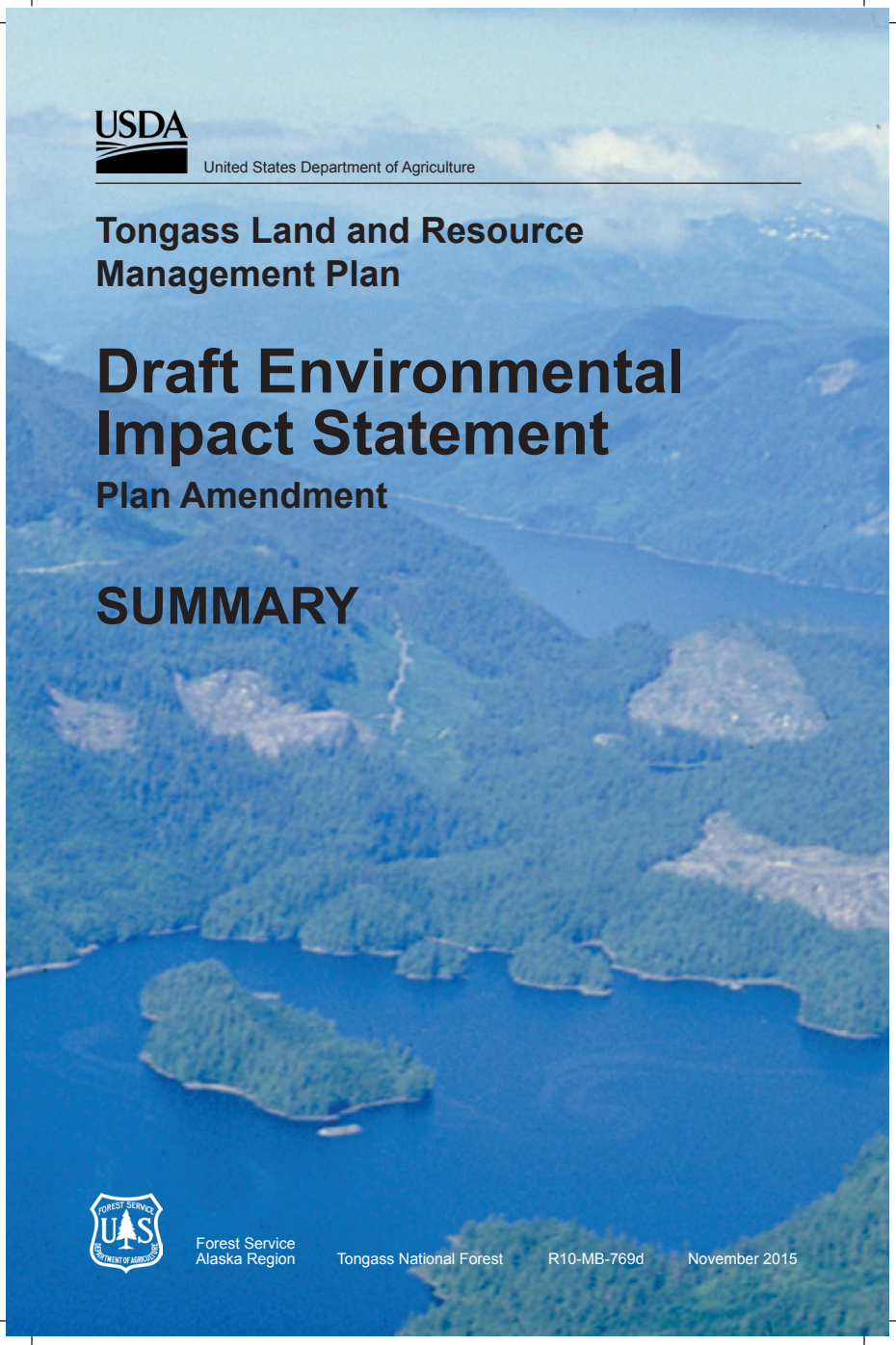

United States Department of Agriculture

Tongass Land and Resource Management Plan

Draft Environmental Impact Statement

Plan Amendment

SUMMARY

Forest Service
Alaska Region

Tongass National Forest

R10-MB-769d

November 2015

Tongass National Forest

Welcome

This Summary accompanies a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and Draft Proposed Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan), which have been prepared for your review, consideration, and comment. Most reviewers will be receiving an electronic version of these documents on a CD. The CD contains a cover letter, Draft EIS (two volumes), Draft Proposed Forest Plan, and supporting maps. The Draft EIS is available as a complete bookmarked version in one file, as well as split into four parts in smaller files for easier opening. The Draft Proposed Forest Plan is available as a clean version, as well as a version that shows the changes that have been made to the current Forest Plan in "track changes." We recommend you start your review by reading the cover letter.

The Forest Plan amendment website, http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/tongass/landmanagement/?cid=stelprd3801708, provides additional information and documents are located in the project newsroom, http://www.fs.usda.gov/detailfull/tongass/landmanagement/?cid=stelprd3828076&width=full. The websites include a variety of products developed in support of this project, and easy access to other associated Web sites.

Publication of the Notice of Availability of the Draft EIS in the Federal Register begins a 90-day public comment period. The closing date of the comment period will also be posted on the project Web site. Comments on the Draft EIS are most helpful if they are specific and address the adequacy of the Draft EIS and the merits of the alternatives. A number of public meetings and hearings are also being scheduled throughout Southeast Alaska during the 90-day comment period. The locations and schedule of public meetings/hearings will be posted on the project website.

Summary

How to Use the CD

The CD-ROM has an “autostart” feature that should start the application when you put the CD in your computer. If the application starts correctly, a Welcome page containing links to the documents should open up. If the CD does not start by itself shortly after you insert it in your CD drive, then simply double-click on the Index.htm file on the CD.

Introduction

Forest land and resource management planning is a process for developing, amending, and revising land and resource management plans for each of the National Forests in the National Forest System (NFS). Forest plans are required by the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA) (16 United States Code [U.S.C.] parts 1600-1687). The 16.7-million-acre Tongass National Forest was the first forest to complete a Tongass Land Management Plan under the NFMA in 1979. That Forest Plan was amended in 1986 and 1991 and revised in 1997. A final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) was completed in 2003, which further evaluated roadless areas for their wilderness potential. The Forest Plan was amended again in 2008 in response to a Ninth Circuit Court ruling and a 5-Year Plan Review completed in 2005. The revised Plan was amended 24 times between the 1997 revision and the 2008 amendment, primarily to adjust small old-growth habitat reserve boundaries and for electronic/communication site designation. Since the 2008 amendment, the plan has been amended to establish the Héen Latinee Experimental Forest, disestablish the Young Bay Experimental Forest, add communication sites to the list in Appendix E of the plan, modify small old-growth habitat reserves, and make minor corrections to the plan.

In 2013, Secretary of Agriculture, Thomas Vilsack, issued Memorandum 1044-009, Addressing Sustainable Forestry in Southeast Alaska, which expressed the Secretary's intent to transition the Tongass National Forest to a young growth–based timber program in 10 to 15 years, more rapidly than considered in the 2008 Forest Plan. The Secretary asked that the Forest Service "strongly consider whether to pursue an amendment to the Tongass Forest Plan. Such an amendment would evaluate which lands would 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."

Additionally, the Forest Service completed a Five-Year Review of the Forest Plan in September 2013. The results of the Five-Year Review and the Secretary's Memorandum led to the Tongass Forest Supervisor making a determination that "…conditions on the land and demands

of the public require the Tongass to modify the 2008 Forest Plan" (USDA Forest Service 2013a). A notice of intent (NOI) to prepare an environmental impact statement was published in the Federal Register on May 27, 2014 (79 FR 30074) initiating a 30-day scoping period. Comments from the Five-Year Review and from scoping requested a transition to young-growth timber harvesting, ways to make renewable energy projects easier to implement, and a review of the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule (Roadless Rule) inventoried roadless areas (IRAs). All comments were taken into consideration in identifying the scope of this Forest Plan amendment.

Purpose and Need

The Forest Service determined that it is necessary to amend the 2008 Tongass Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan). Amending the Forest Plan originates from the July 2013 memo from the Secretary of Agriculture directing the Tongass National Forest to transition its forest management program to be more ecologically, socially, and economically sustainable, while also being responsive to comments from the Five-Year Review of the Forest Plan. The purpose of this plan amendment is to:

- Review lands within the plan area to determine suitability for timber production, especially young-growth timber stands.
- Identify the projected timber sale quantity (PTSQ) and the sustained yield limit (i.e., the ecological yield of timber that can be removed annually on a sustained yield basis).
- Establish plan components (e.g., standards and guidelines) for young-growth forest management and renewable energy development to guide future project decision-making.
- Disclose and assess the direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts of the reasonably foreseeable future actions resulting from the management actions in the draft amended Forest Plan, environmental impact statement and draft alternatives pursuant to the requirements of the NEPA, its implementing regulations, and other applicable laws.
- Consolidate modifications made to the Forest Plan since its approval.

Summary

An amendment is necessary for responding to the July 2013 direction from U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Secretary Tom Vilsack outlined in the Secretary's Memorandum 1044-009. The memorandum directs management of the Tongass National Forest to expedite the transition away from old-growth timber harvesting and towards a forest products industry that uses predominantly second-growth – or young-growth – forests. Secretary Vilsack's memorandum also guides that the transition should be implemented in a manner that preserves a viable timber industry that provides jobs and opportunities for Southeast Alaska residents. 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. The 2008 Forest Plan currently provides for a transition to young growth over time, but there are challenges in establishing an economically viable young-growth forest management program due to the relatively young age of the available stands, market conditions, and other factors. Secretary Vilsack's direction requires Forest Plan amendments to guide future management of NFS lands and allocation of resources on the Tongass National Forest under the multiple-use and sustained yield mandate.

The need to amend the plan is further corroborated by the Five-Year Review of the Forest Plan, completed in 2013, which concluded that conditions on the land and demands of the public necessitate the Tongass National Forest to make changes to the Forest Plan. Concerns were consistently expressed during the Five-Year Review regarding the impact of rising fossil fuel prices and increasing climate change on the quality of life in Southeast Alaska. Changes to the Forest Plan are needed to make the development of renewable energy resources more permissible, including considering access and utility corridors to stimulate economic development in Southeast Alaska communities, and provide low-carbon energy alternatives, thereby displacing the use of fossil fuel.

Summary

Issues

Identification of issues helps define or predict the resources or uses that could be most affected by the management of NFS lands. These issues are then used as a basis to formulate alternatives or to measure differences between alternatives.

Public Input

Identification of issues helps define or predict the resources or uses that could be most affected by the management of NFS lands. These issues are used as a basis to formulate management alternatives or to measure differences between alternatives.

An NOI to prepare an environmental impact statement was published in the Federal Register on May 27, 2014 (79 FR 30074) initiating a 30-day public scoping period. The NOI asked for public comment on the proposal until June 26, 2014. The Forest Service received approximately 124,000 letters and of these, 250 letters were unique. For this DEIS, comments and information from a wide variety of commenters including Forest Service personnel, public, other agencies and non-governmental organizations that related to amending the Forest Plan were considered. This information included input expressed during project-level NEPA analyses over the past several years; during the 5-year review, and received in response to the Notice of Intent and the Web site for this EIS

The Notice of Intent published in the Federal Register in May 2014. The notice initiated the scoping process, which will help guide the development of the EIS. The scoping comment period was open between May 27, 2014 and June 26, 2014. Approximately 124,000 letters were received during the scoping comment period from federal and state agencies, individuals, non-governmental organizations, businesses, and Native corporations. Of these, 250 letters were unique. Additionally, government-to-government consultation has been conducted throughout the process, and is ongoing, with federally recognized Tribes; a Youth Advisory Council from Ketchikan High School was established and have been participating in this planning effort and open houses were held in Juneau, Sitka, and Ketchikan to engage the public in this planning process.

The USDA established a Federal Advisory Committee to advise the Secretary and Chief on transitioning the Tongass to young-growth forest management. The committee, known as the Tongass Advisory Committee (TAC), consists of members from the timber industry, conservation community, Native interests, state and local governments and other interests. In May of 2015, the TAC provided the Secretary with a comprehensive package of Forest Plan amendment recommendations.

A summary of public participation and input is presented as Appendix A to the EIS.

The Four Significant Issues

Any alternative that proposes to change the Forest Plan could affect resources and/or outputs relative to the current Forest Plan. Chapter 3 of the Draft EIS shows the effects of the various alternatives for all relevant resources. Some of these changes are, however, more likely to influence the comparison between alternatives, and more emphasis and analysis is placed on these issues. Review of the public input received prior to publication of the Draft EIS identified four significant issues that are the major issues driving the alternatives and the analysis.

Issue 1 – Young Growth Transition

The Secretary of Agriculture asked the Forest Service to transition to a young-growth-based timber management program on the Tongass National Forest in 10 to 15 years, which is more rapid than planned. This transition is intended to support the Tongass managing its forest for an ecologically, socially, and economically sustainable forest management program and reduce old-growth harvest while still providing economic timber to support the local forest products industry.

The issue concerns financial efficiency, salability, and volume of future timber sales. It also relates to the potential local employment and revenues generated for communities in the local area. Young-growth stand growth rates, sustainable harvest rates, the amount of old-growth harvest needed during transition to sustain the timber

industry, also known as “bridge timber,” and the locations where young-growth harvest would take place are some of the factors to be considered.

Issue 2 – Renewable Energy

The development of renewable energy projects on the Tongass would help Southeast Alaska communities reduce fossil fuel dependence, stimulate economic development, and lower carbon emissions in the Region.

This issue relates to comments received during the Five-Year Review of the Forest Plan. The Forest Service should promote the development of renewable energy projects to help Southeast Alaska communities reduce fossil energy dependence, where it is compatible with National Forest purposes and to ensure that the planning, construction, and operation of projects protect and effectively use NFS lands and resources.

Issue 3 – Inventoried Roadless Areas

Timber harvest and road building that occurred in roadless areas before the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule (Roadless Rule) was enacted and during the Tongass exemption period changed the values or features that often characterize inventoried roadless areas in some locations.

Issues and concerns received during scoping as well as during the Five-Year Review process expressed concerns about roadless areas on the Tongass; both in favor of protections afforded under the 2001 Roadless Rule as well as requesting that the forest plan be amended to address the significant changes brought about by its re-instatement on the Tongass.

Some people believe roadless areas on the Tongass should be allowed to evolve naturally through their own dynamic processes and should be afforded protection that ensures this will occur. Others believe that limiting road construction and reconstruction or other management actions in roadless areas might restrict the delivery of goods, services, and activities that these areas might otherwise provide.

Roadless areas are considered important because they support a diversity of aquatic and terrestrial habitats, species, and communities, and play an important role in helping to conserve native plant and animal communities and biological diversity. They also provide people with unique recreation opportunities.

During the Tongass exemption period and before the 2001 Roadless Rule was enacted, road construction, reconstruction, and the cutting, and sale of timber in some IRAs occurred. As a result, these activities in some IRAs may have altered the roadless characteristics.

Issue 4 – Wildlife Habitat and the Conservation Strategy

Old-growth timber harvest has changed the composition and spatial patterns of terrestrial wildlife habitats. How the resulting young-growth is managed may influence the future ecological integrity of the landscape at various scales. Changes made to suitable lands designated for development, and to plan components (e.g., standards and guidelines) may affect old-growth habitat for wildlife and the Tongass Conservation Strategy and contributing elements to old-growth reserves (e.g., riparian, beach and estuary habitats).

The Tongass National Forest supports an important assemblage of wildlife many of which are associated with or at least partially dependent on old-growth forest including one of the largest populations of brown bears in the world, high densities of breeding bald eagles, the Alexander Archipelago wolf, species of high importance for subsistence (e.g., Sitka black-tailed deer), an extensive array of endemic mammals, and other species that are dependent on old-growth habitats (e.g., marten and goshawk). The Tongass Old-growth Conservation Strategy is considered important for the continued health of old-growth associated wildlife populations in Southeast Alaska.

Timber harvest, minerals and renewable energy development, and road development can have important effects on the habitat and populations of many of these species and the diversity and integrity of Southeast Alaska ecosystems. Although less than 10 percent of the productive old-growth habitat on the Tongass has been converted to young growth, the percentage is much higher for certain types of old growth, such as lowland and large-tree old growth. In addition, non-

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NFS old growth has generally been harvested at a much higher rate. Therefore, the consideration of harvest and road building on wildlife in Southeast Alaska are greater than the effects for the Tongass by itself.

Alternatives

Proposed Forest Plan

The current 2008 Forest Plan is associated with the No- Action alternative (Alternative 1). However, a number of changes to the Forest Plan text are being proposed. These changes are incorporated into a Proposed Forest Plan (Land and Resource Management Plan), which accompanies the EIS, and the major changes proposed are summarized in this section. The proposed Forest Plan was developed based on the Preferred Alternative (Alternative 5).The individual alternative descriptions on the following pages only identify items that are not consistent with the current Forest Plan or the Proposed Forest Plan.

Summaries of the main changes that are incorporated into the Proposed Forest Plan are provided below.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Content was modified to reflect the changes between the 2008 Forest Plan and the Proposed Forest Plan, explain how the 2012 Planning Rule applies to new direction, reflect current conditions and make clarifications. The priority of direction was modified to reflect the proposed Forest Plan Amendment.

Chapter 2 – Goals and Objectives

Content was updated with respect to the Proposed Forest Plan and make clarifications to ecosystem services and Forest-wide goals and objectives. Several clarifications were made to Forest desired conditions. One modification was made to a Forest desired condition and added under Forest-wide plan components in this Chapter 5 of the Proposed Forest Plan. The old-growth desired condition was removed from Chapter 2 and rewritten in Chapter 5 as DC-01. Three desired conditions for Transportation System Corridors were added as DC-02, DC-03, and DC-04 in Chapter 5. A new Renewable Energy

goal was added as G-RE-01 and a Transportation goal was removed and replaced by G-TRAN-01 in Chapter 5. Two timber objectives were removed and rewritten in Chapter 5 as objectives O-TIM-01 and O-TIM-02.

Chapter 3 – Management Prescriptions

The Transportation and Utility System overlay LUD was removed, as well as all associated direction (i.e., "window" and "avoidance area") in the LUD Standards and Guidelines pertaining to application of this overlay LUD. No other LUDs were removed. Other LUD boundaries were modified to reflect changes since 2008. Clerical errors were corrected. Changes were made to update (i.e., add or delete) new statutory or regulatory requirements. Where LUD Standards and Guidelines referenced directives (Forest Service handbook [FSH] or manual [FSM]) and repeated existing direction, corrections were made to delete the repeated direction. Land descriptions (Special Designations or Classifications) were removed from this Chapter and inserted into Appendix L of the Proposed Forest Plan to eliminate redundancies and consolidate similar content.

Chapter 4 – Standards and Guidelines

Throughout this chapter, administrative changes were made to correct clerical errors or address conformance of the Proposed Forest Plan to new statutory or regulatory requirements, such as removal of Coastal Zone Management Act coordination and references to the Allowable Sale Quantity. Forest-wide Standards and Guidelines (BEACH2, II., 6 and 7) were deleted and replaced by Standard (S-BEACH-01) in Chapter 5. Forest-wide Standards and Guidelines (WILD1, IV., Legacy Forest Structure) were clarified to verify Value Comparison Unit (VCU) information during project analysis. A clarification was made to the Forest-wide Standards and Guidelines for Northern Goshawk (including the Queen Charlotte goshawk subspecies) (WILD4, II. Sensitive Species, A. 1. c. Nesting Habitat) to clarify that if productive old-growth alone is not sufficient to maintain an area of not less than 100 acres around a nest, the largest diameter young-growth forest will be used.

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Chapter 5 – Implementation

This chapter was moved to Chapter 6 and its content was re-written to explain new requirements under the 2012 Planning Rule for project consistency, plan amendments and administrative changes.

A new Chapter 5 was added (Plan Content Developed under 2012 Planning Rule). Plan content added to Chapter 5 includes direction for young-growth management, renewable energy, transportation system corridors, and forest wide components.

Chapter 6 – Monitoring and Evaluation Plan

This chapter included the monitoring and evaluation plan which was developed under the provisions of the 1982 Planning Rule. Under the provisions of the 2012 Planning Rule, the plan monitoring program is being modified to meet the requirements of the Rule (36 CFR 219.12(c)) and a draft is included with this Forest Plan under a separate cover.

Chapter 7 – Glossary

This chapter has been updated to include new glossary terms and words, and to remove terms and words that are no longer relevant to this Forest Plan.

Appendices

Appendix A – Timber Resource Land Suitability was renamed "Identification of Lands as Not Suitable and Suitable for Timber Production" and its contents updated to meet the requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule (36 CFR 219.11).

Appendix B – Information Needs was replaced in its entirety by the Tongass Advisory Committee's draft recommendations (May 11, 2015) as reflected in the Proposed Forest Plan.

Appendix C – Watershed Analysis was modified for the new direction in the Proposed Forest Plan (young-growth harvest in riparian management areas) to meet stream process group objectives in Appendix D.

Appendix D – Riparian Management Area Standards and Guidelines was updated to update stream channel type nomenclature to match channel type revisions and current GIS attributes.

Appendix E – Communication Sites was updated to include all existing communications sites.

Appendix F – Visual Priority Routes and Use Areas was updated to correct clerical errors.

Appendix G – Log Transfer Facility Guidelines was not changed.

Appendix H – Karst and Cave Resources was modified to remove young-growth management on karst (re-written as young-growth plan components in Chapter 5.)

Appendix I – ROS Class Standards and Guidelines was modified to reflect the new Renewable Energy and Transportation System Corridor management direction.

Appendix J – Tongass Annual Program of was removed and replaced by Special Land Designations or Classifications (formerly Appendix L, Special Interest Areas and Experimental Forests)

Appendix K – Old-growth Habitat Reserve Modification Procedures was not changed.

Appendix L – Special Interest Areas and Experimental Forests was updated to reflect changes made to special interest areas and experimental forests. Land descriptions previously found in Chapter 3 were moved to this appendix to consolidate similar content and eliminate redundancy. This appendix is now Appendix J.

Provisions Common to all Alternatives

Under all alternatives, there is flexibility in terms of when young-growth stands may be harvested. Under Public Law 113-291, up to 15,000 acres of young growth may be harvested from 2016 through 2025, in stands less than 95 percent CMAI. This CMAI flexibility may continue after 2025 (with annual maximums); however, the total acreage harvested at less than CMAI cannot exceed 50,000. In addition, young-growth sales under this provision may not be offered unless they represent non-deficit sales. However, there is flexibility in NFMA to allow a continuation of harvesting at younger ages beyond 2025.

Summary

Proposed LUD Changes Common to the Action Alternatives

The LUD allocations for each alternative are described in the following alternative-specific descriptions. The LUDs for Alternative 1 (No Action) are different from the LUDs for the action alternatives. The action alternatives are different because of Old-Growth Habitat LUD changes. Under Public Law 113-291, approximately 70,000 acres of NFS land were conveyed to Sealaska and an additional 152,000 acres were converted to LUD II. As a result, Old Growth Habitat LUDs or Reserves in 16 VCUs were affected. Beginning in February 2015, an interagency team of biologists worked to develop a biologically preferred option for old-growth reserves (OGRs) that meets Forest Plan Appendix K criteria and to document why other proposals are not recommended. In September 2015, they produced this option (see Appendix E) and the Forest Supervisor agreed to incorporate this option into each of the action alternatives. Therefore, the LUD acres vary between Alternative 1 and the action alternatives (Alternatives 2, 3, 4, and 5).

In addition, the Transportation and Utility Systems overlay LUD would be removed under Alternatives 2, 3, 4, and 5. The LUD management prescription would be replaced by plan components under Alternatives 2, 3, 4, and 5 and would provide management direction for renewable energy and transportation systems corridors (see Chapter 5 in the proposed Forest Plan).

The proposed Forest Plan that accompanies this EIS represents the Forest Plan if Alternative 5 (Preferred Alternative) were to be selected. Many of the changes reflected in the proposed Forest Plan are consistent with Alternative 2, 3, and 4, but some are not. The similarities and differences among the alternatives, with respect to the proposed Forest Plan, are detailed in Appendix F to this EIS.

Alternative 1

The No Action Alternative represents current management direction (2008 Forest Plan) and includes the application of the Roadless Area Conservation Rule (2001 Roadless Rule) (36 CFR 294 Subpart B). Under this alternative, timber harvest would follow the existing timber sale program adaptive management strategy in all phases

outside of inventoried roadless areas (USDA Forest Service 2008c). Timber management would be restricted to the development LUDs and no commercial harvest would be allowed in beach and estuary fringe or RMAs. The 2008 Forest Plan management direction would be followed.

Key Elements of Alternative 1

Old-growth Harvest

- Follows 2008 Forest Plan Timber Sale Program Adaptive Management Strategy for Phases 1, 2, and 3
- No harvest allowed in Inventoried Roadless Areas

Young-growth Harvest

- Allows harvest in Development LUDs, including Clearcutting
- Allows no harvest in Non-Development LUDs
- Allows no harvest in Inventoried Roadless Areas
- Allows no commercial harvest in Beach and Estuary Fringe or in RMAs
- There is flexibility to harvest 50,000 acres at a younger age than 95% of CMAI per Public Law 113-291
- Scenery standards (SIOs) would not be modified for young growth

LUD Changes

- None

Other New Plan Components (Chapter 5)

- None

Alternative 2

As in Alternative 1, this alternative would follow the existing timber sale program adaptive management strategy in all phases for old-growth harvest. However, the portions of inventoried roadless areas (IRAs) that were roaded before the 2001 Roadless Rule and during the 2001 Roadless Rule exemption period for the Tongass would be available for young-growth and old-growth harvest. This would require rulemaking to modify 36 CFR 294.13(b)(4). If selected, no harvest could occur in IRAs until rulemaking is completed.

Summary

Alternative 2 would differ substantially from Alternative 1 in terms of young-growth harvest. Young-growth management would be allowed in both development and non-development LUDs (except for Congressionally designated and administratively withdrawn areas, such as Wilderness, and islands less than 1,000 acres in size), in beach and estuary fringe, RMAs outside of Tongass Timber Reform Act (TTRA) buffers, and high-vulnerability karst. No harvest would occur in IRAs that have not been roaded. However, the portions of IRAs that were roaded before the 2001 Roadless Rule and during the 2001 Roadless Rule exemption period for the Tongass would be available for young-growth and old-growth harvest after rulemaking.

Young-growth management may include clearcutting in all areas, except in RMAs and on high-vulnerability karst, where only commercial thinning (up to 33 percent basal area removal) would be allowed. After 15 years, clearcutting would no longer be allowed in the beach and estuary fringe; only commercial thinning would be allowed. In addition, scenery standards for young-growth management would be relaxed; SIOs would be Very Low for all LUDs and distance zones.

Key Elements of Alternative 2

Old-growth Harvest

- Follows 2008 Timber Sale Program Adaptive Management Strategy for Phases 1, 2, and 3.
- The portions of IRAs that were previously roaded would be available for harvest after rulemaking.

Young-growth Harvest

- Allows harvest in Development LUDs, including clearcutting, and entry into all phases of the Timber Sale Program Adaptive Management Strategy without regard to harvest levels.
- Allows harvest in Non-development LUDs, except for Congressionally designated and administratively withdrawn areas and islands < 1,000 ac.
- The portions of IRAs that were previously roaded would be available for harvest after the Roadless Rule changes or the Tongass Roadless Rule Exemption is reinstated.
- Commercial harvest is allowed in Beach and Estuary Fringe, in high-vulnerability karst, and in RMAs outside of TTRA buffers.
- Clearcutting is allowed on all lands suitable for timber production, except RMAs and high-vulnerability karst where only commercial thinning is allowed. The maximum removal in RMAs outside of TTRA buffers is 33 percent. Clearcutting in Beach and Estuary Fringe is not allowed after 15 years (basal area).
- There is flexibility to harvest at a younger age than 95 percent of CMAI throughout the life of the Plan.
- Scenery standards would be relaxed to Very Low SIO for young growth harvest.

LUD Changes

- Old Growth Habitat LUDs were modified to correspond with the biologically preferred alternative in areas where they were negatively affected by land conveyances and other changes resulting from Public Law 113-291.
- The Transportation and Utility Systems overlay LUD is removed.

New Plan Components (Chapter 5)

- Young-growth plan components added to Forest Plan.
- Renewable Energy plan components added to Forest Plan.
- Transportation Systems Corridors plan components added to Forest Plan.

Summary

Alternative 3

Alternative 3 would allow old-growth harvest only in Phase 1 of the existing timber sale program adaptive management strategy. This alternative would allow young-growth and old-growth harvest in 2001 Roadless Rule IRAs. If this alternative were selected, harvest in IRAs would be deferred until the Roadless Rule changes or the Tongass Roadless Rule Exemption is reinstated.

Alternative 3 is similar to Alternative 2 in that it identifies lands as suitable for young-growth timber production in both development and natural setting LUDs (except for Congressionally designated areas such as Wilderness, and administratively withdrawn areas and islands less than 1,000 acres in size), as well as in beach and estuary fringe and high-vulnerability karst, but not in RMAs. Young-growth management may include clearcutting in all areas, except in beach and estuary fringe and on high-vulnerability karst, where only commercial thinning is allowed. In addition, scenery standards (SIOs) for young growth management would be reduced by one level relative to the 2008 Forest Plan (i.e., High is reduced to Moderate, Moderate is reduced to Low, and Low and Very Low become Very Low).

Key Components of Alternative 3

Old-growth Harvest

- Follows 2008 Timber Sale Program Adaptive Management Strategy for Phase 1 only.
- Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRAs) would be available for harvest after the Roadless Rule changes or the Tongass Roadless Rule Exemption is reinstated.

Young-growth Harvest

- Allows harvest in Development Land Use Designations (LUDs), including clearcutting, and entry into all phases of the Timber Sale Program Adaptive Management Strategy without regard to harvest levels.
- Allows harvest in Non-development LUDs, except for congressionally designated and administratively withdrawn areas and islands smaller than 1,000 acres.
- IRAs would be available for harvest after the Roadless Rule changes or the Tongass Roadless Rule Exemption is reinstated.
- Commercial harvest is allowed in Beach and Estuary Fringe but not in RMAs.
- Clearcutting is allowed in all areas except Beach and Estuary Fringe and high-vulnerability karst, where only Commercial Thinning is allowed.
- There is flexibility to harvest at a younger age than 95 percent of CMAI throughout the life of the Plan.
- Scenery standards for young growth management would be relaxed; SIOs would be reduced by one level relative to the 2008 Forest Plan (i.e., High is reduced to Moderate, Moderate is reduced to Low, and Low and Very Low become Very Low).

LUD Changes

- Old-Growth Habitat LUDs were modified to correspond with the biologically preferred alternative in areas where they were negatively affected by land conveyances and other changes resulting from Public Law 113-291.
- The Transportation and Utility Systems overlay LUD is removed.

New Plan Components (Chapter 5)

- Young-growth plan components added to Forest Plan.
- Renewable Energy plan components added to Forest Plan.
- Transportation Systems Corridors plan components added to Forest Plan.

Summary

Alternative 4

Like Alternative 3, this alternative would allow old-growth harvest only in Phase 1 of the existing timber sale program adaptive management strategy. Similar to Alternative 1, this alternative includes the application of the 2001 Roadless Rule.

Alternative 4 would allow young-growth management only in the development LUDs. Harvest is allowed in beach and estuary fringe and on high-vulnerability karst, but only commercial thinning is allowed. No harvest is allowed in RMAs. Young growth management may include clearcutting in other areas. No change would occur in scenery standards relative to the 2008 Forest Plan.

Key Components of Alternative 4

Old-growth Harvest

- Follows 2008 Timber Sale Program Adaptive Management Strategy for Phase 1 only
- No harvest is allowed in Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRAs).

Young-growth Harvest

- Allows harvest in Development Land Use Designations (LUDs), including clearcutting, but allows entry only in Phase 1 of the Timber Sale Program Adaptive Management Strategy.
- Allows no harvest in Non-development LUDs.
- Allows no harvest in IRAs.
- Commercial harvest is allowed in Beach and Estuary Fringe and in high-vulnerability karst within Development LUDs, but no harvest is allowed in RMAs.
- Clearcutting is not allowed in Beach and Estuary Fringe and high-vulnerability karst; only commercial thinning is allowed.
- There is flexibility to harvest before 95 percent of CMAI throughout the life of the Plan.
- No change would occur in scenery standards relative to the 2008 Forest Plan.

LUD Changes

- Old-Growth Habitat LUDs were modified to correspond with the biologically preferred alternative in areas where they were negatively affected by land conveyances and other changes resulting from Public Law 113-291.
- The Transportation and Utility Systems overlay LUD is removed.

New Plan Components (Chapter 5)

- Young-growth plan components added to Forest Plan.
- Renewable Energy plan components added to Forest Plan.
- Transportation Systems Corridors plan components added to Forest Plan.

Summary

Alternative 5

Alternative 5 is the Forest Service Preferred Alternative. This alternative is based on the recommendations from the Tongass Advisory Committee (TAC), a formally established Federal Advisory Committee (see Appendix B of the proposed Forest Plan). The establishment of the TAC represents a turning point in Tongass management seeking new approaches, practices, and responses. The TAC offers a regionally focused, collaborative path toward an innovative opportunity for a viable young growth timber industry while honoring the suite of values – economic, ecological, social, and cultural – inherent in the Forest.

Like Alternatives 3 and 4, this alternative would allow old-growth harvest only within Phase 1 of the timber sale program adaptive management strategy. As in Alternatives 1 and 4, the 2001 Roadless Rule would apply and no old-growth or young-growth harvest would occur in IRAs.

As in Alternative 3, Alternative 5 would allow young-growth harvest in all three phases of the timber sale program adaptive management strategy. It would allow young-growth management in development LUDs and in the Old-growth Habitat LUD including harvest in Beach and Estuary Fringe and RMAs outside of TTRA buffers within these same LUDs. However, harvest in the Old-growth Habitat LUD, Beach and Estuary Fringe, and RMAs outside of TTRA buffers would be allowed only during the first 15 years after Plan approval, and only group selection (up to 10-acre openings with no more than 35 percent removal) or commercial thinning would be permitted. In Beach and Estuary Fringe, a 200-foot no-cut buffer adjacent to the shoreline would be required. Scenery standards (SIOs) for young growth management would be reduced to Very Low for all distance zones in the development LUDs only.

Key Components of Alternative 5

Old-growth Harvest

- Allows harvest only within Phase 1 of the 2008 Timber Sale Program Adaptive Management Strategy.
- No harvest is allowed in Inventoried Roadless Areas

Young-growth Harvest

- Allows harvest in Development LUDs, including clearcutting, and entry into all phases of the Timber Sale Program Adaptive Management Strategy without regard to harvest levels.
- Allows harvest in Old Growth Habitat LUDs, but not in other Non-development LUDs or on islands less than 1,000 acres
- No harvest is allowed in Inventoried Roadless Areas
- Commercial harvest is allowed in Beach Fringe outside of a 200-ft buffer and in RMAs outside of TTRA buffers
- In Old Growth Habitat LUDs, Beach Fringe (outside of a 200-ft. buffer) and in RMAs outside of TTRA buffers, clearcutting is not allowed, but group selection (<10-ac openings and a maximum of 35% removal) is allowed, along with commercial thinning. Harvest is allowed in these land categories only during the first 15 years after plan approval.
- There is flexibility to harvest at a younger age than 95 percent of CMAI throughout the life of the Plan.
- The scenery standards (SIOs) would be reduced to Very Low in Development LUDs only.

LUD Changes

- Old Growth Habitat LUDs were modified to correspond with the biologically preferred alternative in areas where they were negatively affected by land conveyances and other changes resulting from Public Law 113-291.
- The Transportation and Utility Systems overlay LUD is removed.

New Plan Components (Chapter 5)

- Young-growth plan components added to Forest Plan.
- Renewable Energy plan components added to Forest Plan.
- Transportation Systems Corridors plan components added to Forest Plan.

Comparison of the Alternatives

This section briefly compares the environmental consequences of the five alternatives with respect to the significant issues described in Chapter 1. This comparison is based on the effects analyses presented in Chapter 3. A more detailed summary is included in Chapter 2.

Issue 1 – Young-growth Transition

The purpose and need for this project is primarily based on a memorandum from the Secretary of Agriculture (see Chapter 1) that directs management of the Tongass National Forest to expedite the transition away from old-growth timber harvesting and towards a forest products industry that utilizes predominantly second-growth – or young-growth – forests. Secretary Vilsack's memorandum also guides that the transition should be implemented in a manner that preserves a viable timber industry that provides jobs and opportunities for Southeast Alaska residents. 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.

Because of the Secretary's memorandum, the existing condition emphasizes a transition to young growth and minimizes old-growth harvest, but does this within the constraints of the 2008 Forest Plan. Alternative 1 (No Action) would result in full transition to a predominantly young-growth-based industry in about 32 years, well beyond the 15 year goal presented by the Secretary. In contrast, all of the action alternatives would result in a full transition in about 12 to 16 years. Because these timeframes represent full transition, the period in which the "vast majority of timber sold by the Tongass will be young growth" is expected to be about 10 to 15 years for the action alternatives. Of the action alternatives, the fastest transition would occur with Alternative 2 and the slowest would occur with Alternatives 4 and 5.

All of the alternatives are expected to support from 187 to 234 annualized direct jobs during the first decade. The highest number of direct jobs supported would be with Alternative 2 and the lowest

with Alternative 1. In addition, each alternative is expected to meet the projected demand for Tongass timber. Therefore, each alternative is expected to meet the criterion of maintaining a viable industry. However, it is unclear how fast industry will be able to "retool" mills and harvesting equipment and how markets will react to switching from old-growth to young-growth products; thus, this criterion is associated with a relatively high degree of uncertainty.

Under all alternatives, the harvest of old growth would diminish over time and the harvest of young growth would increase. Therefore, all of the alternatives would "conserve old-growth forests." The highest old-growth harvest in the first 25 years would be about 40,000 acres with Alternative 1. Each of the action alternatives would harvest substantially less old growth, ranging from 13,000 acres with Alternative 2 to 23,000 acres with 4 and 5. The same pattern among the alternatives occurs with the 100-year harvest as well.

Issue 2 – Renewable Energy

Another important part of the purpose and need for this project is the need to make changes to the Forest Plan so that renewable energy projects are more permissible. The purpose is to stimulate economic development in Southeast Alaska communities, and provide low-carbon energy alternatives, thereby displacing the use of fossil fuel. Under the current Forest Plan, siting of energy projects is limited in certain LUDs, and it would remain that way under Alternative 1. Under each of the action alternatives (Alternatives 2, 3, 4, and 5), changes would be made to the Forest Plan that would result in improved flexibility in siting and development of renewable energy projects.

Issue 3 – Inventoried Roadless Areas

Alternatives 1, 4, and 5 do not enter roadless areas. In Alternative 2, roadless areas that were previously roaded would be available for road construction and timber harvest and in Alternative 3, all roadless areas would be available. With both Alternatives 2 and 3, entry into roadless areas would not be permitted without rulemaking to approve it. Acres of lands suitable for timber production in roadless areas would range from 0 acres for Alternatives 1, 4, and 5, to 33,000 acres

for Alternative 2, to 251,000 acres for Alternative 3. As a result, the protection of roadless characteristics would be excellent with Alternatives 1, 4, and 5, high with Alternative 2, and moderately high with Alternative 3.

Issue 4 – Wildlife Habitat and the Conservation Strategy

Relative to old-growth habitat conservation, Alternative 1 would have the highest harvest (1.2 percent of existing POG), followed by Alternatives 4 and 5 (0.9 percent of existing POG), followed by Alternatives 2 and 3 (0.6 percent of existing POG). The change in the percent of original POG remaining after 100 years would follow the same pattern. Currently, 92 percent of original POG is remaining; under Alternatives 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 this percentage would drop by 1 percent after 100 years. This same pattern would continue for the percent reduction in high-volume POG and for the percent reduction in large-tree POG.

Beach and Estuary Fringe harvest would be lowest under Alternative 1 (no harvest). Under the action alternatives, no harvest of POG would occur, but harvest impacts for young growth would be highest under Alternative 2, which would include the second highest amount of acres but would allow clearcutting. Under Alternatives 3 and 4, considerable young-growth acreage would be harvested, but only by commercial thinning, which would result in much lower effects than clearcutting. Alternative 5 would have the lowest effect on Beach and Estuary Fringe among the action alternatives because the acreage is lowest and only patch cut (up to 10-acre openings with up to 35 percent stand removal) or commercial thinning would be permitted with a one-time entry restriction.

For RMAs, the lowest effects would be associated with Alternatives 1, 3, and 4, which would permit no harvest in RMAs. Alternative 2 would have the greatest harvest impacts in RMAs because it would include the highest amount of acreage and would allow clearcutting during the first 15 years of Forest Plan approval and commercial thinning thereafter. Effects to RMAs would be lower under Alternative 5 due to a lower amount of acres and group selection or

commercial thinning would be permitted but only during the first 15 years after Forest Plan approval with a one-time entry restriction.

In the Old Growth Habitat LUD, Alternatives 1 and 4 would allow no harvest. The greatest amount of harvest in the Old-growth Habitat LUD would occur under Alternative 2, followed by Alternatives 3 and 5. Effects would be greatest under Alternative 2 because it would allow clearcutting, and less under Alternative 3 because only commercial thinning would be allowed, followed by Alternative 5 which would allow group selection or thinning but only during the first 15 year of Forest Plan approval and with a one-time entry restriction.

Average total road density across WAAs (NFS lands only) under all alternatives would be approximately 0.2 miles per square mile, an increase of 0.03 to 0.04 above existing levels. Average open road density across WAAs (NFS lands only) would be approximately 0.1 miles per square mile, an increase of 0.01 under all alternatives. Approximately 82 percent of WAAs would have open road densities of 0.7 miles per square mile or less under the action alternatives. Therefore, any potential increase in hunter access or risk of overharvest for wildlife species would be minor and localized, and would not be measurable at the forest-wide scale under any of the alternatives.

The transition to young-growth management would reduce the long-term decrease in deer habitat capability due to decreased POG harvest. Based on Interagency Deer Habitat Capability model outputs Alternatives 2, 3, 4, and 5 would maintain approximately 1 to 2 percent more of the existing habitat capability than Alternative 1. Forest-wide, all alternatives would maintain 98 to 99 percent of the existing deer habitat capability. Based on the Forage Resource Evaluation System for Habitat (FRESH) deer model, the existing level of habitat quality would be maintained under Alternative 1 or increased by 1 to 4 percent under the action alternatives.

Cumulative POG harvest (all landownerships) would be greatest under Alternative 1, followed by Alternatives 5, 4, 3, and 2. Cumulative effects would be least under the alternatives that

propose the shortest young-growth transition time. After 100 years of Forest Plan implementation, approximately 83 percent of the original (19540) total POG forest would be maintained under all of the alternatives. Alternative 1 would maintain approximately 81 percent and 66 percent of the original high-volume and large-tree POG, respectively. The action alternatives would maintain 82 percent and 64 percent of these POG categories, respectively. Forest-wide cumulative road densities (all land ownerships) would be similar among alternatives (0.45 to 0.46 miles per square mile), representing an increase of 0.11 to 0.12 miles per square mile above current conditions.

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Main Cover Photo: Photograph taken looking northwest from above Neets Bay on north Revillagigedo Island. An unnamed cove and timber harvest on the peninsula lie in the foreground with Gedney Pass and Hassler Island in the background (right).

Inset Photo on Back: Blue Lake Hydroelectric Project (courtesy Desiree Brandis)