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Sent on behalf of the Tongass Advisory Committee

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Tongass Advisory Committee Releases Consensus Recommendations for Forest Management on the Tongass

KETCHIKAN, Alaska – During a meeting held May 6-8 in Ketchikan, the Tongass Advisory Committee finalized its recommendations to advise the Secretary of Agriculture on developing an ecologically, socially, and economically sustainable forest management strategy for the Tongass National Forest. The Committee was specifically charged with providing advice about how to transition the Forest's timber management program from a focus on old growth to predominantly young growth management in a way that is economically viable for the existing industry, while recognizing and balancing the other unique and equally important resource values of the Tongass. The Committee unanimously agreed upon recommendations that address elements needed in the Forest Plan Amendment, as well as the complementary institutional, cultural, and economic changes needed to make a successful transition.

Throughout nine months of deliberations, the overarching goal of the Committee was to bring stability to communities and industry, while preserving ecosystems. This is reflected in the Committee's vision statement that describes a future in which "Southeast Alaska is comprised of prosperous, resilient communities that have the opportunity to predictably use and benefit from the diversity of forest resources to achieve the cultural, social, economic, and ecological health of the region for current and future generations."

Thorough analysis by the Committee revealed that during the 10-15 year transition period specified by the Secretary, the amount of harvestable young growth in the "suitable land base" is not sufficient to support a viable timber industry. The Committee addressed this through creative solutions to bring forward more young growth sooner in the transition period, and simultaneously reduce old growth harvest earlier – for every unit of young growth volume brought forward into the transition solution, an equal unit of old growth will be conserved. Another critical underpinning of the Committee's recommendations is reliance on a "co-intent" mandate to improve habitat conditions and long-term ecological function in young growth stands while producing timber volume from those areas. This approach challenges the status quo approach, and will ultimately lead to a better future for both communities and ecosystems in Southeast Alaska.

The Committee made it clear that cultural and operational changes in how the Forest conducts its business are mandatory for the success of the transition. Co-chair Les Cronk reminded everyone, "There is a lot of personal risk involved in this and we bet a lot on the outcome. It is going to be a long road ahead and it is up to the agency to help make it work." Openness, transparency, and collaboration both within the Forest and with external parties will be essential to a successful outcome. Principal in the Committee's recommendations was the creation of an Implementation and Monitoring Council to serve as the mechanism by which stakeholders can support and help hold accountable the Forest as it makes the transition to primarily young growth based management.

Staff and leadership heard this request, and are willing to be responsive. Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment for the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Robert Bonnie expressed his support, "You have provided a tremendous service to the Forest Service and the USDA. I feel a significant sense of responsibility to carry your recommendations forward." Under Secretary Bonnie continued, "As we

move forward, we will continue to have dialogue to know that [the agency and Department] are doing it right.”

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Committee members reflected on the quality of time spent together, the value of the relationships they built, and the importance of understanding each other’s perspectives. Co-chair Lynn Jungwirth expressed the sentiments of many when she said: “It has been an honor and a privilege to work with such a mature, high-functioning, and honest group. I am excited about seeing what happens in the next fifteen years. This represents an opportunity for a new kind of forest management. This is an honorable plan and the people of the Tongass deserve the opportunity to make it work.”

The Committee will continue to work together to ensure that the transition is successful, providing input during development of the draft and final Environmental Impact Statement for the Plan Amendment, and through implementation and monitoring of the transition.

For more information about the Tongass Advisory Committee, visit <http://www.merid.org/tongassadvisorycommittee>. A full copy of the Committee’s recommendations will be available there soon. The Committee will meet again in Fall 2015 to review outcomes of Forest Service analysis of their recommendations.