

Tongass logging project moves forward to keep small towns alive

By [Kate McPherson](#) Photojournalist: Jacob Curtis - 8:23 AM September 23, 2014

This is part 1 of a 5-part Tongass Timber series

Thousands of acres of old-growth forest will be put up for sale this week by the U.S. Forest Service — the largest logging project announced in two decades.

The project area is located on Prince of Wales Island in the Tongass National Forest. Its size, 6,186 acres of old-growth forest and 46 miles of new roads, is controversial and conservation groups have sued the Forest Service to halt the project.

Communities on Prince of Wales Island rely heavily on fishing and tourism, but the timber industry still supports hundreds of jobs.

“When you don’t harvest any trees or build roads it has as huge effect on the ability of rural communities to stay alive,” said Forrest Cole, supervisor for the Tongass National Forest.

Cole predicts around 600 jobs will be created and many more will be supported by the increase in population.

“There’s pluses and minuses to looking at the Big Thorne project, but more of them are positive for Thorne Bay in the sense that it keeps more people working,” said Thorne Bay Mayor Jim Gould. “It’s just employment that’s sorely needed in our little community.”

Ketchikan Pulp Company (KPC) employees brought their floating logging camp to Thorne Bay on the east of Prince of Wales Island in 1961. For a while, it was known as the world’s largest logging camp. The region’s economy and population took a hit with the closure of KPC in 1997 and since then, small sawmills and the larger Viking Lumber Co. have been hanging on. The Big Thorne project is considered a lifeline to those businesses.

“You take an operation like Viking that is important to the economy of the island as a whole — they have to have a much steadier supply [of timber], they have to know in order to make the investments and keep people at work,” Gould said.

The Forest Service says the Big Thorne timber sale will provide enough wood to Viking Lumber for five years. Small sawmills are also set to benefit with smaller sales being targeted at them.

“The Big Thorne would provide us enough wood for probably 10 years, for the small mills here it would give us some longevity in being able to know what’s coming down the road so we can prepare for markets,” said Keith Landers, the owner of a small sawmill near Thorne Bay.

“I am concerned for the future and what we’ve built and what we’ve made may not carry on,” said Landers’ business partner and wife, Desiree.

But some locals and conservationist say the Big Thorne Project is too much, too fast.

“The cumulative impact of the proposed Big Thorne sale on wildlife habitat is going to be devastating,” said Craig resident Bob Claus.

Claus used to work for a conservation group. Now he's president of the school board and spends as much time as possible outdoors.

"It's been cut over the last 45 to 50 years; the best trees got taken first and they are going after the little bits that are in between," Claus said. "So it'll be an unbroken clear cut from the east side of Prince of Wales Island to the west."

A 20-year resident, Claus says logging is a miniscule part of the economy in Southeast Alaska. Fishing and tourism, along with government jobs, support the majority of people on Prince of Wales Island and throughout the region.

Promotional material created by the Prince of Wales Island Chamber of Commerce focuses on the wild nature of the island and the outdoor activities that tourists can undertake. In the north-central region of the island where the project is located, half of the old-growth forest will be gone after the Big Thorne logging project is completed.

In 1973, timber harvested from Alaska's National Forests peaked at around 590 million board feet.

"I don't believe anybody is asking for those days back; they are asking to use the forest wisely," Gould said.

The Forest Service says the Big Thorne timber sale will provide 15 to 20 million board feet a year for 10 years.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is conducting research to determine whether the Alexander Archipelago wolf should be listed under the Endangered Species Act. Forest Supervisor Cole says logging can begin before a decision on the wolf is made. Several lawsuits are standing in the way of the project, but Cole says he's hopeful the legal action can be resolved by April 2015.

In Tongass, moving away from old-growth logging poses challenges

By [Kate McPherson](#) Photojournalist: Jacob Curtis - 7:14 AM September 24, 2014

This is part 2 of a 5-part Tongass Timber series

Keith Landers planned to purchase a small sawmill on Prince of Wales Island in Southeast Alaska in the mid '90s.

"The night before we got here, it burnt to the ground," Keith Landers said. "And so we weren't able to purchase."

So he tore his mill down in Oregon and moved it to the island in 1995 with his wife, Desiree. Today, K&D Lumber, near the town of Thorne Bay, produces wood shingles and lumber out of old-growth red cedar that is sold to companies in Canada, along with a few local clients.

"It's just a real nice, safe, close-knit community," said Desiree Landers. "And we feel very blessed to live here and make a living here."

The pair has watched the economy and population of Thorne Bay struggle.

"We are hanging on to one grocery store and one gas station," Keith Landers said.

A few years after they moved to Thorne Bay, the Ketchikan Pulp Company (KPC) closed. It was a blow to the Landers' business because the company had a big logging contract with the U.S. Forest Service and small mills were able to access some of that timber.

"We never got what we [were] hoping to get in timber when we set up, because KPC was shut down and that was our lifeline, that's where we got our timber," Keith Landers said. "I've got enough timber to last me until next season, and then we are out."

Keith Landers supports the Forest Service's decision to approve the 6,000-acre [Big Thorne timber sale](#). But he's not happy about the size — he says the area of forest for sale is so big that smaller mills can't afford to buy it.

"I am not for the size of the Big Thorne," he said. "I think right now what happens when you sell something this large, it doesn't really go for the communities."

The Forest Service has 100 million board feet of timber available in one large sale. About half of the logs are allowed to be sold and shipped overseas for processing, and the local sawmill must process the other half within the contract period.

"There's only one mill that has the capability of being able to process 50 million feet in 10 years and that's Viking," Keith Landers explained. "So there really wouldn't be any competition there. Basically, it's set up for the big mill; they are the only ones left."

Viking Lumber Co. is predicted to make the winning bid on the big unit. The Forest Service says it could provide around five years worth of lumber. More than 800 acres, or roughly 20 million board feet, is set aside for small sales targeted at business like K&D Lumber. Still, Keith Landers says the Forest Service could do better.

"Instead of 100 million feet at one time, to sell it in 5 million foot timber sales," he said. "Then there are other mills that would be able to have access to that wood."

Future of harvesting old-growth timber in Alaska unclear

The Forest Service in Alaska is mandated to transition away from logging old-growth forest.

"What we are trying to do today is make that conversion sooner rather than later and it has some difficulties in doing that," said Forrest Cole, supervisor for the Tongass National Forest, who adds that Alaska is the heaviest cutter of old growth in the country.

"If the Forest Service continues on this transition path, in 10 to 15 years we will be largely out of old growth and harvesting more into the young growth," Cole said.

"It's like converting a halibut fisherman to a jellyfish fisherman and you've got the same equipment," he added.

Young-growth forest, or second-growth forest, are areas where the original forest has been logged and trees have grown back. But many sawmills produce products only out of 200- to 350-year-old trees because of their high quality.

"The mills today in Southeast Alaska can cut young growth, smaller logs; the difficulty is finding a market for the products that you can cut out of young-growth material versus the old growth," Cole said.

Alaskan sawmills face tough competition from Lower 48 companies that are already well established in the young-growth timber industry, making the transition to young growth more difficult, according to the Forest Service.

Keith Landers says he'll be out of the shingle business if he had to use second-growth wood because the quality is lost.

“It won’t pass code and the longevity of a second-growth shingle is one tenth as long as what an old growth would be; it wouldn’t even be worth putting on your roof,” he said.

Small operators, like the Landers, hope that some old growth on a small scale will continue to be available into the future.

“I just want to see us have a suitable way of living here and since we are resources based, whether it’s fishing or timber, I’d like to see us have some type of guaranteed sustainability, for our children also,” said Desiree Landers.

Wolf numbers in Tongass unknown, but logging project approved

By [Kate McPherson](#) Photojournalist: Jacob Curtis - 11:26 PM September 24, 2014

This is part 3 of a 5-part Tongass timber series

The U.S. Forest Service says it doesn’t know how many wolves are on Prince of Wales Island, but it will proceed with the Big Thorne timber sale regardless, provided it overcomes several lawsuits.

There is also no requirement for the Forest Service to delay logging while the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determines whether to list the Alexander Archipelago wolf under the Endangered Species Act.

Biologists and conservationists say old-growth forest provides crucial winter habitat for the Sitka black-tailed deer because the canopy prevents large amounts of snow from building up below. The deer on Prince of Wales Island are essential to the wolf population and important to subsistence and sport hunters. The Forest Service has a responsibility to maintain a healthy population of deer and wolf while implementing logging projects.

“We expect the deer populations to go down to some degree, we expect wolf populations to go down some degree,” said Forrest Cole, Tongass National Forest supervisor. “But I do not believe we will be into a situation that warrants a listing of the wolves [under the Endangered Species Act].”

“I believe we have done one of the most extensive wolf analysis in the Big Thorne [Environmental Impact Statement](#) that we’ve ever done before and I also feel we’ve used the best available science out there to make the determination,” Cole added.

In a lawsuit filed in August by the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council and two other conservation groups, the plaintiffs claim that the wolf population has declined substantially since the mid ’90s. The complaint says researchers could account for approximately 29 wolves in the Big Thorne Project area in 2012. After the 2013-2014 filed season, researchers concluded only four wolves remained in that area, according to court documents.

Cole says he doesn’t know how many wolves are on Prince of Wales Island, but he believes hunting, rather than logging, is more of a threat to the viability of the wolf population.

“You don’t need an exact number to basically manage a population, what you do need is monitoring of harvest, monitoring of habitat and when you put all of those pieces together you make a guess, well it’s more than a guess it’s an educated guess,” Cole said.

Currently, 60 wolves can be killed each year, Cole says, and he wants the state to consider lowering the limit.

A fragile ecosystem

It's September, and that means millions of salmon are returning to spawn in rivers throughout the Tongass National Forest. Rivers and streams rely on healthy old-growth forests for shade and erosion control. Buffer zones exist around significant rivers; no logging can occur within a certain distance of the water. Other parts of the Tongass National Forest don't have that protection. On Prince of Wales Island, local resident Bob Claus worries about the future of his home if the 6,000-acre Big Thorne timber sale is allowed to proceed.

"The biggest thing for me is this is the last biggest remaining place where the temperate rainforest exists and we should do what we can to make sure that it continues on into the future," said Claus, who used to work for the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council.

"500 years, think of what was happening 500 years ago in America, and this tree was there," said Claus, pointing to a huge Sitka spruce near the Thorne River. "It's just a tremendous tree."

But the habitat, the whole ecosystem, is destroyed after logging, Claus said.

"How long does it take to grow a 400-year-old tree?" Claus asked. "A forester will tell you 75 years and an environmentalist will tell you, well, you can never have the same circumstances that were there."

"Some of these trees might have been the first of their species since glaciation, so you'll never see another tree like that again, said Claus as he examined the site of a logging project that was completed a few years ago.

Finding a balance in the fragile rainforest ecosystem is not easy, and there is no simple solution.

"You can't maintain timber harvest on every acre you can't maintain wolves on every acre," Cole said.

Guitars, mandolins, ukuleles: Tongass tonewood grows business

By [Kate McPherson](#) Photojournalist: Jacob Curtis - 8:14 AM September 26, 2014

This is part 4 of a 5-part Tongass timber series

There's a beautiful view of Port St. Nicholas from Brent Cole's workshop. Located in the town of Craig on Prince of Wales Island, Cole, his wife Annette and two sons run Alaska Specialty Woods.

Cole works six days a week making soundboards and tonewood that he sells to some of the most renowned manufacturers and craftsmen of musical instruments in 60 countries.

Cole cut his first Sitka spruce tree on Prince of Wales Island to make soundboards in 1994. Sitka spruce ranges from Northern California to the Kenai Peninsula.

"This region right here is the central part of it, and it's the premier area for Sitka spruce," Cole said.

Most of Cole's wood is salvaged from trees that have fallen or from small timber sales. The salvaged wood isn't perfect; mollusks have buried into some of Cole's logs that were stored in water, so he has to cut around the holes. Some trees might also have scars.

"In that particular time of year a branch from a neighboring tree fell or a tree fell over and swiped the tree right there," said Cole, pointing to a discolored line through one of the boards he just cut.

"And it caused a scar," he adds. "There's so much history — each one of those lines here, 24 of them per inch, is a year, so there's a lot of history recorded there and a lot of bugs and a lot of birds and a lot of branches can be flying around."

Working with old-growth trees comes with other risks too.

"I have to look ahead to the future because I do see a diminishing resource," he said.

Cole supports the 6,000-acre Big Thorne timber sale, and related road building, because it will allow him to access areas of the forest he previously couldn't get to in order to find Sitka spruce. He advocates for the U.S. Forest Service to allow logging roads to remain open for longer.

"They dig up the roads, pull the culverts and close the road, and all the timber resource that was left behind, the salvage, whether it was for firewood cutters or myself, all that resource was left behind, it was inaccessible then," said Cole, referring to the Logjam timber sale completed a few years ago.

Cole isn't happy when he sees the valuable trees go to waste.

"Makes me cringe to see a 6-foot diameter or 4-foot diameter clear Sitka spruce tree made into 2-by-4s for a house," he said.

He also questions the Forest Service's policy that allows half of the trees cut in a timber sale to be sold and sent overseas.

Tongass Forest Supervisor Forrest Cole says regulations require a timber company to remove all of the trees out of a certain logging project area, even trees it may not want to process.

"Trying to cut up the small logs in a mill that is set up for larger logs is extremely inefficient, extremely uneconomical," Cole said.

In order to help businesses, like Viking Lumber Company on Prince of Wales Island, the Forest Service allows for the export of some of the timber.

Some small businesses and conservationists argue that the full value is never realized when the log is shipped overseas.

"The latest story I heard was South Korea where they were turned into pallets," said local resident Bob Claus. "And then they are shipped back here with a flat-screen TV on them and then the pallets are burned and no one gets anything from that. It's a loss to us."

The Southeast Alaska Conservation Council (SEACC) is the lead plaintiff in the Big Thorne timber sale lawsuit and says shipping whole logs overseas is one of its main concerns. SEACC spokesperson Daven Hafey says the group supports some sustainable old growth logging that will keep small local businesses, like Brent Cole's, running strong.

"We're not filing lawsuit against all old-growth logging, we're filing lawsuit against the unsustainable, high volume of old-growth logging, up to 50 percent of which will be exported overseas without any local processing," Hafey said.

Alaska Specialty Woods made a surprise find in 2012. While excavating to build their new workshop, an ancient Sitka spruce was uncovered — it turned blue when exposed to air.

“And then I had to get the question answered: How old is it?”

The wood was carbon-dated at estimated to be 2,850 years old.

Cole hopes that the old-growth Sitka spruce trees he works with don't become as rare as this find.

Turning Tongass waste timber into energy

By [Kate McPherson](#) Photojournalist: Jacob Curtis - 11:48 AM September 27, 2014

This is part 5 of a 5-part Tongass timber series

Having been in the timber industry on Prince of Wales Island for more than three decades, Mel Cook has worked with some of the most beautiful wood in the world. But he says the availability of timber isn't what it used to be, and his business and his body is slowing down.

“We supported five families [at the sawmill] for a lot of years,” said Cook. “But nowadays, it's just getting too tough to deal with.”

Now, the 65-year-old wants to enter a new business venture with other small sawmills on the island.

“It just bugs me the waste, the waste just kills me,” he said. “I've burned up millions of Btus of wood.”

Cook wants to turn sawdust and scrap wood into pellets that can heat homes and businesses.

A vast amount of wood remains in the forest after an area is clear cut. Cook estimates the amount of wood left in the forest from the proposed Big Thorne timber sale alone would be enough to sustain a pellet plant for 10 years. But he needs the U.S. Forest Service's approval to collect the wood.

Cook says financing is the number one thing holding him back. The size of the pellet mill he wants to build will cost up to \$18 million.

Larry Jackson, owner of Tongass Forest Enterprises in Ketchikan, says he operates one of three pellet plants in the state. Since 2003, Jackson and his small team have been making custom wood products, which includes anything from tables to bus shelters, cabins to oyster floats.

“Originally, the first five years to seven years we just burned all of this,” said Jackson, pointing to a pile of sawdust and wood scraps. “And there became less tolerance for the smoke.”

Jackson installed a pellet machine to put his sawdust and waste to good use. His wood pellets heat the federal building and library in Ketchikan.

One of the biggest hurdles for a pellet mill is the limited number of buildings and houses that have a pellet fuel appliance. But Tongass National Forest supervisor Forrest Cole says the numbers are increasing.

“Five years ago, I could count every facility that was using pellets on one hand,” said Cole. “And today, I can’t keep count of them. It’s really starting to take off.”

The Forest Service says before another mill is viable in the Southeast, the demand for pellets needs to increase, meaning more people need to convert their heating systems.

Jackson says his pellet machine is only operating at 10-percent capacity, but he believes more people will convert their heating systems to take pellets because it’s cheaper than oil. Jackson doesn’t make much of a profit from his pellet mill, but he’s happy to continue running it because it keeps money in the state as opposed to buying heating oil from outside.

“So that dollar stays here,” Jackson said. “It pays for the guys to manufacture the pellets, the guy to deliver the pellets, so the dollar to heat the building never left the town.”

On the issue of old-growth logging in the Tongass National Forest, Jackson thinks Alaska should focus on using the old-growth trees in specialty products. He doesn’t think local businesses can compete if they are forced to convert to using second-growth trees.

“If we go into all second-growth, we are going to be competing with other big countries,” Jackson said. “So why do we want to go compete in that world when we have exclusive old-growth? We’ve reduced the volumes, we are below the suitable yield of the timber lands in the Tongass.”

Court agrees to review Tongass Roadless Rule case

By [KTVA CBS 11 News](#) 3:42 PM August 29, 2014 ANCHORAGE –

A decision allowing new road construction and logging in the nation’s largest national forest will be reviewed.

Friday, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals announced it will review a case that challenges Tongass National Forests’ exemption from the [Roadless Rule](#), adopted in 2001 to protect millions of acres of national forests and grasslands from new road construction and logging, according to a statement from Earthjustice, a nonprofit environmental law organization.

Back in 2009, a group of Alaska Native, tourism and environmental organizations challenged a 2003 ruling that temporarily exempted the Tongass forest from the Roadless Rule. In 2011, a federal judge ruled in the coalition’s favor, reinstating the Roadless Rule for the Southeast Alaska forest. The State of Alaska then appealed the decision and a three-judge panel voted 2-1 to reverse the judge’s opinion.

Friday’s decision means the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals will reconsider the case before a new 11-judge panel in December, said Earthjustice, whose attorneys have represented the coalition wanting to nix the Roadless Rule exemption for the Tongass forest.