

# Community-Level Engagement

## TTC Work Group Call, February 15, 2023 – Summary

### Participants

- Quinn Aboudara (with members of the Community Forest crew and Tribal Conservation District)
- Mike Cooney
- Jason Gubatayao
- Andrew Thoms

### Goals

1. Connect agency staff with community-level needs and capacity.
2. Educate and communicate progress, challenges, and opportunities associated with young growth.

### Challenges

**Decision-making and planning are currently based on high-level assumptions within the Forest Service’s project planning processes that, even with the best of intentions, do not necessarily align with/reflect local community needs and interests, or realities on the ground such as local infrastructure and capacity.** The Forest Service’s lack of consistent, early, in-depth community engagement is a significant reason for this disconnect and the reason for many of the problems that continue to hamper more progress towards meeting young growth goals. Examples include when the Forest Service assumes that a single contractor can handle all aspects of a project (timber harvest, restoration, thinning, etc.) when that capability does not exist, or when there is inadequate consideration for road systems / closures etc., or when sales offered are too large for small operators in the proposed project area to handle.

**The Forest has limited capacity to conduct in-depth community engagement** across the landscape even though there are talented individuals at all levels who are doing their best in the current structure using traditional approaches (e.g., NEPA). The Work Group believes there are opportunities through SASSfm and by leveraging the efforts of Forest Partnerships and other local entities to do better.

### Proposed Approaches

The work group’s suggestions for addressing the needs for earlier and more constructive community engagement are below. Please note that these suggestions **do not represent agreement or consensus among the call participants**. They are a compilation of ideas that were discussed – from differing perspectives.

- 1) **Engage communities in the earliest stages of project planning.** This should involve outreach directly to communities most affected by sales/projects prior to and separate from the public comment period of NEPA - focusing on the business climate and economic feasibility as much as on social acceptance of the project. Forest Service Staff need to be receptive to feedback and be willing to change (or abandon) a project if needed.
- 2) **Take advantage of Community Forest Partnerships and other community entities** to gather input, support project planning and potentially to serve as subcontractors for various project components based on skills and capacity. Examples include the approach to subcontracting with the Big Thorne old growth timber sale; Sealaska road use planning; and the Hoonah Stewardship Council. It could be helpful to take advantage of social media to disseminate information and gather input – which may require increasing the capacity/capability of partnership entities. And, within the Forest Service, ensure that partnerships are considered part of everyone’s duties, as opposed to solely the responsibility of the Forest-wide Partnership Coordinator.
- 3) **Maintain a standing collaborative group (e.g., TTC)** to provide a conduit for communities and sectors that are impacted by and dependent on the Forest to have input into and dialogue about the Forest’s significant management decisions – with clearly established expectations about how recommendations/input will be used. An example could be offering input to the proposed 10-year timber sale schedule – beyond simply reviewing it after it has already been developed. It was noted that to remain engaged in such a group, members would need to see progress/results/real action before committing to future involvement.
- 4) **Designate young growth coordinators to serve as liaisons to share information and opportunities on each District.** The work group did not necessarily endorse this idea, noting that “what we need is young growth coordination, not necessarily young growth coordinators.” However, the spirit of the idea is to have more intentional focus on young growth at the district/community level, and strengthen connectivity between the Forest and its communities on issues related to young growth. If the idea of young growth coordinators were to be pursued, the work group suggested that the coordinators be agency funded, but hosted by local organizations. They could be integrated into the Sustainable Southeast Partnership, similar to the approach of the Community Catalyst positions. And, they would need to work closely with the Partnership Coordinator (Amanda Cochran) and Young Growth Coordinator (Mike Sheets).