

TTC WORK GROUP SUGGESTIONS

DISCUSSION DRAFT

This draft is a compilation of goals, challenges and suggestions that were brought up by TTC members during work groups calls conducted since the TTC meeting in December 2022. The intent of the calls was not to develop consensus recommendations, but rather to share varying perspectives about the issues under consideration and develop a range of ideas about possible ways to improve performance toward meeting young growth goals. (Input from the Metrics and Data work group was largely duplicative of what other work groups discussed, so has been incorporated into other sections where appropriate).

I. SUPPLY

Goals

1. Develop a much clearer picture than currently exists of the amount of young growth supply that could be available for harvest under different management scenarios, during the next ten years and beyond. Related goals from the Metrics and Data Work Group:
 - Create metrics that help guide, prioritize, and balance on-the-ground needs.
 - Ensure existing data, analysis, and inventory are being utilized to inform planning.
 - Identify data gaps and future needs.
2. Clarify the interests and factors that are important to people with different perspectives about what should be the appropriate size of the timber industry in SE Alaska in the future – in hopes of defining an agreed upon vision about the nature and scale of industry.

Challenges

It is very difficult to try to define the future of the timber industry in SE Alaska without a more refined estimate of what potential supply really looks like. Operators cannot make investments or try to expand markets without some information/assurances (e.g., long term contracts) about supply.

The Forest Service has a lot of data compiled forest-wide but lacks granular-level information to inform the kind of forecasting and planning that could lead to more successful projects.

The agreement that was achieved by the TAC to pair bridge timber from old growth with “co-intent” has been strained on both sides – by reinstatement of the roadless rule and the decision to back away from transitional old growth on the one hand and the lack of progress towards achieving the range of benefits assumed under co-intent on the other – bringing into focus the distinction between those who support industry and those who favor a “restoration economy”.

New bug infestations have become another factor complicating supply analysis.

Suggestions

1. **Build on the basin analysis work that is currently underway** (and on work that is also happening at the State level and elsewhere) by getting to a more granular level of analysis, defining maximum yield under a range of scenarios (e.g., different rotation lengths), and incorporating community input – with the intent of getting to actionable solutions that can be implemented.

The working groups recognized that Forest Service does not currently have the bandwidth for conducting a lot of additional analysis, but suggested that cost-share agreements, consultants, and partnerships, etc., may help deal with the internal capacity shortfall. Community Forest Stewardship Councils could be a way to engage in more outreach to and engagement by communities, by providing updates, outcomes of analysis, etc.

In addition to collecting and synthesizing new data it is important to utilize information that is already available, to build upon it, to connect the various pieces of information into a coherent picture of what is possible and desirable at the local level over various time horizons (including infrastructure and workforce considerations), and to determine how to measure impact at scale. There are several data collection and analysis initiatives underway that could help support development of sale schedules, etc., as well as relevant current environmental analyses that might be useful. (As an example: information already compiled for Thorne Bay could be incorporated into the basin-level analysis). It might be useful to also look at working circles as a complement. In addition, given stand variability there will always be a need for “boots on the ground” to ground-truth data that is collected in the aggregate.

2. **Conduct an inventory of PCT acreage that has already been treated and assess the results.** Go beyond the numbers of acres treated to how the forest has responded over time (e.g., reduction in stem exclusion / amount of improved deer habitat. Recognize these will be long-term measurements. It would also be helpful to determine what is available to divert to biofuel for renewable heat source utilization (versus what slash needs to remain for the ecosystem).
3. **Take advantage of roads systems that are already built out** (e.g., on POW) – thereby providing more ability to balance values across the landscape in a cost-effective manner.
4. When considering economic factors:
 - **Keep round log exports on the table for analysis** purposes to see how exports “pencil out” under various scenarios.
 - **Look at operability costs associated with different management scenarios** and evaluate the economics associated with opening size, adjacent units.
 - **Incorporate the interests of small mill owners**, e.g., by taking advantage of the work that is being done to understand the needs of manufacturers on POW.
 - **Take a long view and learn from and avoid past mistakes.**

II. Management Prescriptions and Integrated Management

Challenges

Contrasting Perspectives. This work group’s deliberations manifested a contrast between: a) those TTC members who prefer to prioritize restoration, recreation and resiliency, with a commitment to return areas that are especially valuable for fish, wildlife, climate, watershed improvement, and subsistence to old growth conditions – and where harvest occurs to utilize selective harvest techniques and limited small openings, and b) other members who want to retain a stronger focus on timber production with options for larger scale sales, the use of clear cuts as a management tool, and the potential for exports (although no one advocated “going back to the pulp mill days”).

The work group acknowledged that these contrasting perspectives have been at play for a while, and that there have been attempts to bridge / reconcile / blend them through “integrated resource management” and “co-intent”. There are mixed results in how co-intent has been implemented - that should serve as lessons to help inform future approaches (good projects in some places, and poor results in others – e.g., two-acre openings that increased costs, were inadequate to support deer needs, and sometimes resulted in significant blow-down). However, many of the Forest Service staff who developed and have attempted to implement those approaches are gone – so there is concern that new staff are “recreating the wheel” to some extent. It was noted that there is an increasing amount of information available about outcomes from different restoration techniques.

From Metrics and Data work group: The Forest Service uses metrics to guide its program of work. **The metrics which are currently driving Tongass timber management are narrowly construed, based on an outdated Forest Plan, do not encompass forest management as a holistic enterprise and do not necessarily result in desired outcomes.** For example, there is a focus on number of sales offered versus number of bids (without sufficient regard to whether sales even receive bids or move forward to completion). The consequences of relying on “widget-based” metrics rather than ones that are more outcome-based include lack of incentive/accountability for producing promised supply and/or achieving other management objectives.

Suggestions

1. **Develop a set of principles emphasizing values from SASSfm that would guide early-stage planning for managing young growth** in ways that support multiple benefits and needs (e.g., suitable habitat for deer and other wildlife, timber supply, healthy streams, cultural uses, access for berry picking and other uses that are important to local communities, etc.). One member proposed the following as a possible starting point for discussions about principles:
 - a) Commercial logging would occur in conjunction with a multifaceted forest management approach that ensures a healthy, resilient and sustainable natural environment.
 - b) Projects incorporating commercial timber harvest should prioritize local mills and processing and local markets wherever possible, and not rely on export.
 - c) Manage young growth stands for multiple benefits where the value of the timber is inadequate to support the project. Such projects nonetheless are important and deserving of investments in restoration.

Related suggestion from the Metrics and Data work group: **Update Forest management metrics to reflect community benefits, represent the outcomes we want to see on-the-ground, and provide the context for what sales and restoration projects to pursue.** This will help get us to desired outcomes, provide insights into systemic issues that are standing in the way of more progress towards meeting young growth goals, and to eventually help guide the next Forest Plan – i.e., a new rudder to help us navigate to a better future for the Forest and its communities. One example of a useful metric could be including deer as one underlying/prioritized factor for community well being (and an indicator of forest health).

2. **Enable a variety of prescriptions** developed with local input and knowledge about the project area, accounting for community needs and interests, as well as the long-term health of the landscape – rather than mandating prescriptions in the abstract. (Some in the group favored allowing for clearcuts up to 40 acres, others favored smaller openings).
3. **Recognize that restoration cannot be applied on every acre.** Figure out where to do “rational forestry” and where co-intent can work. Alternatively, designate some acreage within timber LUDs for harvest and designate other acreage on which to concentrate restoration.
4. **Do not allow the push for returning young growth to old growth conditions to foreclose opportunities** for some commercial harvest in the future.
5. **Examine what can be accomplished by having planning teams comprised of both timber and restoration professionals working together** on holistic approaches - using realistic assessment of stand productivity, road infrastructure, community interests (including their future vision for the forest and industry’s needs), etc. into account - to integrate multiple objectives within a watershed (e.g., producing both timber and deer from a singular watershed). The approach used on the Staney Creek sale offers a possible example, although its focus on old growth bridge timber may make it less relevant to current circumstances.
6. **Focus on community collaboration, meaningful consultation with Alaska Natives, and partnerships** to develop projects with broad public support and to add capacity for project implementation.
7. **Identify short- and long-term opportunities for investment** that reflect the diverse opportunities and needs in the region.
8. **Enhance management for cedar** (e.g., re-planting, thinning, and selective harvest for cultural use, arts and cultural businesses).

III. Products and Markets

Goals

1. Produce competitive young growth products.
2. Provide support for mills to process young growth.

Challenges

Grading requirements represent a significant barrier to small mills being able to sell materials to builders with projects that require graded and stamped lumber (e.g., most residences and commercial buildings). The market for ungraded lumber is restricted to a limited number of uses such as small cabins, sheds, greenhouses, and ancillary products (siding, trim, etc.). The number of businesses that are constrained by stringent grading requirements in what are still niche young growth products is relatively small, but the ability to grow is hampered by the grading requirement. Grading is very expensive and exemptions to the grading requirements are extremely limited. There are systemic issues that exacerbate the problem – e.g., a shortage of building inspectors, the role of fire marshals and insurers, etc.

The industry is significantly challenged by the rapid pendulum swing from old growth to young growth. Young growth is less valuable and still in short supply. Slash is more of an issue when young growth is harvested. The markets for young growth are still being clarified/evolving (and will likely not include lumber for housing all over Alaska). It is unrealistic to expect that young growth products from Southeast Alaska will compete with inexpensive lumber from the lower 48 – even though quality of Alaska products may be superior.

While there is an interest in fiber for heating purposes, the costs of transportation, absence of reliable continuous supply, high moisture content of available wood, and the high up-front costs of boilers are barriers to scaling beyond small, local operations. Wood-based electricity generation is prohibitively difficult and expensive.

Suggestions

1. **Continue to push for a more reliable supply** of timber – across ownerships.
2. The USDA / Forest Service should **purchase locally produced wood products**.
3. **Provide support / funding for mills to “tool up”**. This does not necessarily mean purchasing new machinery. Many of the 35 or so small operations also need help with business planning, market research, cash flow management etc. Spruce Root, which provides training and support for small businesses, may be a useful resource in this regard.
4. **Consider community or regional advisory councils** focused on building young growth-based economies – modeled perhaps on subsistence councils.
5. **Allow for a mix of both export and domestic sales** of young growth.
6. **Take advantage of opportunities that do exist for small-scale use of harvest by-products/slash** to fuel boilers to provide heat for homes and within communities where it makes sense (e.g., where neighborhoods might be able to connect to a centralized heating source).
7. **Track and support efforts that are underway in the Alaska Legislature – partly in response to the extremely tight housing supply - to address challenges with grading.** There are questions regarding how the current Uniform Building Code (UBC) may need to be revised/legislated and the discussion regarding how these conversations relate to the housing crisis in Alaska under the lumber grading section. In the long-term the UBC needs to be updated. Note that Wisconsin has developed a provision that allows for self-graded lumber – which might serve as a useful example for Alaska.

IV. Community-Level Engagement

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 intentions, do not necessarily align with or reflect local community needs, 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 a reason for many problems that continue to hamper more progress toward meeting young growth goals. Examples include when the agency assumes a single contractor can handle all aspects of a project (e.g., timber harvest, restoration, thinning, etc.) when that capability does not exist, 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.

Many people are unaware of the numerous Forest Service efforts that are underway relative to young growth or what progress the Forest Service has achieved. Often what happens internally is not communicated externally, especially with local communities. Even those who are regularly involved in management discussions internally are sometimes surprised to learn what is happening.

Suggestions

- 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 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 strengthened 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. Also, they would need to work closely with the Partnership Coordinator (Amanda Cochran) and the Forest-wide Young Growth Coordinator (Mike Sheets).