



# Southeast Alaska Sustainability Strategy

## Forest Management

On July 15, 2021, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced the new *Southeast Alaska Sustainability Strategy* (SASS) to help support a diverse economy, enhance community resilience, and conserve natural resources in Southeast Alaska. The strategy to be undertaken on the Tongass National Forest and in Southeast Alaska includes four primary components:

- Ending large-scale, old-growth timber harvest and focusing resources to support forest restoration, recreation, climate resilience, and sustainable young-growth management.
- Proposing to restore 2001 Roadless Rule protections.
- Engaging in meaningful consultation with Tribal Nations.
- Identifying short and long-term opportunities for investments that reflect the diverse opportunities and needs in the region.

In alignment with SASS, the Forest Service is refocusing resources on the Tongass National Forest to implement an integrated forest management program that includes watershed and wildlife habitat restoration, sustainable young-growth harvest, and old-growth harvest for small timber sales and cultural uses. The Forest Service is implementing other SASS components including investments, recreation assets and opportunities, and proposed roadless protections independent of specific plans for forest management. This document focuses only on the forest management aspects of SASS.

This *SASS Forest Management* strategy describes an integrated approach to shift from a singular objective of timber management to integrated management actions that include terrestrial and aquatic restoration, young-growth timber management, and small and micro old-growth timber sales. Within the framework of the 2016 Tongass Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan), the Forest Service will intentionally design integrated forest management projects that support a diverse economy, enhance community resilience, conserve natural resources, and retain climate-resilient forests. The Forest Service will also address limitations in workforce capacity, industrial and community infrastructure, and agency policies in order to plan and implement projects more efficiently. This *SASS Forest Management* strategy aims to strengthen the ability of the Tongass National Forest, Tribal Nations, and other partners to collaboratively manage natural resources for the benefit of Southeast Alaska.

### Integrated Forest Management

Integrated forest management uses an interdisciplinary approach to identify desired resource conditions and incorporate multiple resource and restoration objectives with timber management objectives. In the context of SASS, the Forest Service will continue to implement active and proposed watershed and habitat restoration projects to improve forest resilience and will further develop a long-term sustainable timber program that provides old growth for small timber sales

and new opportunities for young-growth harvest and development of healthy, resilient stands that meet identified desired conditions. Project planning will consider subsistence objectives; traditional and customary uses including cultural wood; needs for non-timber forest products such as firewood, mushrooms, and berries; and other traditional cultural uses.

During the next 10 years, forest growth and yield projections indicate there will be limited commercial young-growth timber available for harvest, scattered geographically across the Tongass. In addition to a small old-growth timber program that supports a key sector of the timber industry, the Forest will leverage investments in watershed restoration and habitat improvement to support a diverse economy, promote partnership opportunities, and maintain and grow a local workforce. Restoration opportunities will also be integrated with timber harvest activities to optimize heavy equipment mobilization. Restoration byproducts may benefit new and existing industry such as biomass facilities. In limited areas where restoration priorities and timber opportunities are geographically isolated, projects may proceed independently to meet individual resource management objectives.

As the viability of commercial young growth opportunities increases, the Forest Service will focus forest management projects in areas where industry has transitioned to young-growth timber harvest, where processing can occur locally, and where activities can provide benefits to local communities.

### **Watershed and Wildlife Habitat Restoration**

The Forest Service will work with partners to restore key ecological processes, improve resilience to hydrologic variability, provide fish passage, restore riparian and instream habitats, implement young-growth forest restoration treatments, and control invasive species. Activities will be strategically identified and managed at the Forest-scale and implemented at the watershed-scale based on site-specific needs.

Aquatic and riparian restoration approaches will include:

- Manage riparian vegetation to promote a sufficient density of large trees available for instream recruitment in perpetuity.
- Implement travel analysis recommendations to reduce risk to water quality and restore aquatic and riparian habitat.
- Improve stream connectivity across all roads and provide aquatic organism passage (AOP) where fish are present.
- Identify stream reaches at risk of degrading function, and design restoration actions to maintain or improve habitats with a goal of long-term resilience.
- Locate and eradicate invasive species to promote natural succession. Integrate invasive species control with restoration and forest management activities.

Wildlife habitat restoration approaches will include:

- Implement habitat restoration activities to accelerate development of old-growth conditions within the Old-growth Habitat land use designation (LUD), riparian management areas, and beach and estuary fringe.
- Implement noncommercial and commercial thinning treatments that maintain or improve deer winter range and habitat connectivity by promoting accessible forage and snow

interception. Evaluate and remediate past impacts to deer winter range and habitat connectivity, where appropriate.

- Integrate remnant patch and residual tree conservation and road density planning for vulnerable wildlife species into young-growth forest management activities.

## Timber Management

The Tongass National Forest will maintain an old-growth timber program focused on small sales and microsals and will continue to develop a young-growth timber program. Timber management and restoration activity objectives will be met using a full range of silvicultural prescriptions available in the Forest Plan, ranging from even-aged (clearcut) to uneven-aged management.

The young-growth timber management program will be implemented based on the collaboratively developed 2016 Forest Plan Amendment. In addition to management approaches documented in the Forest Plan, young-growth timber management approaches will include:

- Implement silvicultural treatments that will meet resource objectives and may provide opportunities to utilize new and existing techniques and equipment to increase the effectiveness and capacity for both timber and restoration-based projects.
- Upgrade and restore roads to improve aquatic organism passage and hydrologic function as they are opened for young-growth management activities.
- Plan the timing and extent of young-growth harvest within a watershed to minimize effects on water yield and maintain natural variability in streamflow conditions.
- Thin young-growth stands to promote resilience, vigorous growth, and favorable species composition to achieve desired future condition. Focus on treating stands nearing the upper age limit of the “thinning window.”
- Seek stand improvement opportunities to enhance growth and recruitment of Alaska yellow-cedar, where appropriate, to combat the effects of climate driven yellow-cedar decline.
- Improve stands suitable for timber management outside of the Old-growth Habitat LUD and beach and estuary fringe by cutting areas exhibiting stagnant growth or with unfavorable species compositions. Design silvicultural treatments to regenerate favorable tree species and allow for future precommercial thinning to control density, maintain tree vigor, provide more commercial volume, and benefit wildlife habitat through the next rotation.

Old-growth timber management approaches will include:

- Maintain an average of 5 MMBF of old-growth timber volume awarded annually through small and micro sales to benefit local communities.
- Conduct planning efforts that provide a 3-year supply of old-growth timber to create a predictable source for local operators and contribute to community resilience. Settlement sales and permits (including fuelwood and cultural use) would not count toward the 5 MMBF annual average.
- Conduct environmental analyses to build on existing field surveys and analysis of old-growth timber stands.
- Utilize the 5-year Tongass National Forest Timber Sale Plan to illustrate the planned offerings of both young and old-growth timber.

- Continue engagement with local tribal governments to provide old-growth trees for cultural uses through no-cost permits.

## **Collaboration and Tribal Engagement**

Integrated forest management projects will be identified and prioritized in collaboration with partners including industry, local communities, conservation organizations, and other landowners and will be informed through meaningful consultation with Tribal Nations. Tribal Nations will be provided opportunities to describe, identify, or remove cultural wood to maintain for future generations or for uses such as totem poles, canoes, and tribal artisan use. These opportunities will be provided both within identified forest management project areas and independent of projects.

## **Workforce Capacity Needs**

- Align the Forest Service staff organizations with the skills needed to increase capacity for planning and implementing restoration activities, as well as monitoring activities.
- Increase capacity of contracting and grants and agreements staff to better support partnership and project development.
- Invest in workforce training for natural resource surveys, aquatic and terrestrial habitat work, young-growth timber removal, and resource monitoring. Work with Tribes, partners, and community groups to build workforce capacity and collaborate on training and work opportunities.
- Work with existing industry to determine how Forest Service restoration and improvement projects can be used to provide local employment opportunities while developing a restoration economy.

## **Industry and Infrastructure Needs**

- Work with the All-Landowners Group to provide a 10-year integrated project plan including timber sale, restoration, and infrastructure contract offerings across all landownerships in Southeast Alaska. This will inform the local forest products industry, including support businesses which are linked by service or supplier relationships, of upcoming timber projects to plan, maintain and improve their operations.
- Assist local operators and sawmills with finding opportunities to adapt or retool to harvest and process young-growth sawlogs.
- Assist local operators in finding funding to facilitate investment in innovative restoration equipment.
- Develop strategic short- and long-term access management plans to determine transportation network needs and efficient use of Federal road maintenance funding.
- Explore long-term stewardship contract opportunities to create a predictable pipeline of projects that enable a contractor to acquire new equipment, maintain a viable business model, and allow for restoration-based workforce skill development.

## **Policy Needs**

- Provide time and materials contract opportunities for AOP projects and in-stream work. This allows contractors to spend the time needed to meet design standards.

- Reduce matching requirements for agreements with our partners. Stringent match requirements limit their ability to engage in projects on the Forest.
- Provide specific exemptions to allow advertising young growth timber sales that may appraise deficit when using a residual value appraisal. This will improve flexibility in meeting community needs for low-value timber products such as biomass.

## Investment Needs

To realize the Forest Management Strategy objectives, these investments in the next 10 years will be critical:

- LiDAR (light detection and ranging) acquisition and interpretation across the Forest to increase effectiveness of restoration and timber planning projects. LiDAR will enable the Forest to improve initial planning efforts, including potential for identification of habitat for species.
- Transportation infrastructure. This includes road construction, reconstruction, maintenance, and decommissioning. Develop modular bridge infrastructure for short-term access.
- Reconstruction of log transfer facilities for young growth.
- Updates to the Tongass Resource Use Cooperative Survey (TRUCS) identifying subsistence use areas.
- Additional subsistence management monitoring and subsistence use gap analysis and studies on the Tongass.
- Precommercial thinning in young-growth stands (approximately 8,000 acres per year). These funds will cover the backlog of existing unthinned stands in suitable timber.
- Riparian and terrestrial forest restoration treatments (approximately 1,400 acres per year). These funds will cover the backlog of existing untreated clearcuts in conservation areas, allowing for short- and long-term habitat benefits during a critical treatment window.
- Stream restoration projects using heavy equipment and hand tools.
- AOP road/stream crossing improvements, adding or increasing the size of culverts to restore hydrologic connectivity, and workforce development for road assessments.
- Invasive species management, including inventory and treatment Tribes and other partners.
- Research related to vegetation management and water yield for managing young-growth forests.
- Collaboration with US Forest Service State and Private Forestry to identify new opportunities for forest products such as biomass. This will likely require additional research on harvest methods, product testing, and market research.

## Next Steps

The Forest Service will continue to work in partnership with communities and Tribes across Southeast Alaska to intentionally design forest management projects that engage community and support local industry. More specifically focus areas will include:

- Research and development of biomass opportunities.
- Workforce development and training.
- Integration of forest management to contribute to community and ecosystem resilience.

- Engagement with Tribes and local communities on cultural and community uses of forest products.
- Capitalizing on opportunities for collaboration, engagement, and management of resources of high interest.
- Showcasing past, present, and future forest management projects to highlight their benefits to Southeast Alaska communities.
- Conducting a review of this strategy with Forest Plan reviews scheduled for 2026.