

SASSfm 10 Year Program of Work Project List Review

TTC Conference Call – DRAFT Call Notes

TUESDAY, MARCH 12TH, 2024

Participants

Participants: Michael Cooney, Robert Sheets, Andrew Thoms, Barbara Miranda, Brian Kleinhenz, Vernon Born, Ben Case, Clarence Clark, Steve Connelly, Brie Darr, Dennis Nickerson, Michael Downs, Georgia Reid, Gregory Dunn, Eric Garner, Jeff Hermanns, Ian Johnson, Julia Nave, Sheila Spores.

Facilitation staff: Connie Lewis, Emily Bruyn, and Tori Anderson.

Meeting Materials

- The working SASSfm integrated project list that was reviewed during the call is located at: https://tongasslandmgmt.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2024/03/Integrated-Resources-Projects_SASSfm.pdf
 - Sheila Spores presentation slides are located at <https://tongasslandmgmt.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2024/03/March12-SASSfm-presentation.pdf>
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Welcome

Frank Sherman, USFS Forest Supervisor

Frank Sherman provided a welcome and an overview of SASSfm. The work of responding to the Secretary's SASSfm initiative has involved every level of the Forest, and encompasses watershed, wildlife conservation, habitat restoration, a sustainable young growth (YG) strategy, and an old growth (OG) strategy for cultural use among other resource components across 30 project areas. An initial long list of proposed projects got a lot of comments. The list was subsequently whittled down to 24 and through further refining at the district level will result in even fewer projects in the next couple years, based in part on who the available partners are. The objective of working with partners is to accomplish as much

work as possible. One of the purposes of this call is to seek input on additional partnership opportunities.

The NEPA process will vary across projects. Some will require an Environmental Assessment (EA), some just a categorical exclusion (CE), but anything with an OG component will require an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), with a few exceptions. In general, YG timber sales require an EA, which helps to minimize the paperwork and resources involved in planning those sales.

Ten Year Plan Overview

Sheila Spores, USFS Soils Management Staff Officer

Shelia presented a slide deck that provided additional context and background about what SASSfm has meant for the Forest and detailed the specifics of developing the list of proposed projects.

Ever since SASSfm was announced, the Forest has been working to figure out how to implement the program. One of the challenges is that anything the Tongass does right now receives national attention. Three large projects with both OG and YG components were put aside at the outset and there is currently no NEPA volume cleared and “on the shelf” other than in Thomas Bay. In the next two to three years the Forest will expend all its cleared OG. However, the way to enable OG harvest in the future is by integrating other resource objectives, e.g., fish habitat improvement, thinning, YG, and partnerships – and integrated resource approach (IRM) just makes sense. If a project meets multiple resource objectives, it demonstrates the Forest is combining restoration objectives with economic opportunity.

One concern is that bundling OG into these projects runs the risk of potential litigation, which completely holds up all restoration work. Nesting NEPA is the strategy here. If there is an area that combines a YG stand with a smaller OG portion, the YG will be on the EA track and OG will require an EIS. If there is pushback on OG, it will be delayed without impacting work to be done on the YG portion. A CE can be used to clear some OG for cultural use. The analyses for these different NEPA requirements can be cross-referenced, so the work does not have to be completely redone each time. This will require multiple agreements, contractors, and partnerships, diversified in such a way as to not enhance rather than to stymie progress.

General Q and A, Comments and Discussion

- Funding
 - Please put the subject of funding into a “parking lot” for future discussion. We would like to better understand, for example, the statement that “SASS does not come with funding” and what the Tongass budget status is.
 - If it is a commercial timber sale, you don’t need funding. In fact, you can add requirements that the harvester do restoration after the logging.
 - Is there opportunity for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and other entities to contribute funding? The RD has been helpful in providing additional support on Prince of Wales (POW). There could be additional funding opportunities with these proposed SASSfm projects. Another \$5 mi has been requested.

- All projects on the list are valuable. There was a lot of minutiae in the SASSfm portal that is not captured in the proposed Scope of Work (SOW), for example enhancing a berry picking area.
- What opportunities will there be for the community members to help refine the projects and make sure they address as many opportunities as possible?
 - The hope is to work with partners/stakeholders prior to formal scoping – to add and refine the proposed action. Once into scoping, the ability to add on is limited.
- It would be helpful to list a primary point of contact for each project area.
- We are interested in the Stanley drainage floodplain forests that were previously logged and are now coming back up. They are important for habitat.
- I like how this priority list is driven by resource needs. But there is only so much capacity, both from the Forest and among partners. It would be helpful to look at scheduling a little differently than just through project prioritization. A near-term touch in Sitka, Ketchikan, Juneau would be helpful, but without overloading district or partnership frameworks. Scheduling should consider the possibility of success, the ability to achieve results with partners, not just how they rank on the list.
- There is a need to describe this body of work in terms of the commonalities across the work and opportunities to add capacity. For example, with work on the road system, describe the nature of it, the current capacity across the region to take on the work, and the desire and opportunities that exist to build that capacity. Same for silviculture and recreation. Recognize the commonalities, overlapping interests, and how a partnership with the TTC could increase capacity for whatever might be needed region-wide. Can we develop a region-wide strategy based on these commonalities? If we do regional training, we can catalyze more work on the ground that will be useful to future applications.
- What kind of capacity building is helpful? The Forest values workforce development initiatives, additional funding, planning and project implementation. SEAWC has been instrumental in helping train crews. This sort of capacity is very useful to the Forest.
- On partnerships – if you can package higher priority projects with other add-on projects or benefits, e.g., talking about recreation and cultural opportunities at the same time, that will help with buy-in on these projects. The Forest says it is directing \$17million towards cabins across the region, which gets mentioned in briefings that are used for getting national level approvals.
- A major take-home from the spreadsheet is the large number of red pipes and the need for capacity development to address the backlog – look to Tribal Transportation, Forest Partnerships, TCD, etc. for additional capacity.
- The POW district is interested in acquiring modest equipment for doing its own road maintenance. Early on road maintenance can help prevent more costly, disruptive problems down the road. “Progressive road maintenance” as an IRM project that addresses a lot of resources – recreation, subsistence, fisheries, etc.. Why was this dropped?
 - As described, it was not an IRM because there is no vegetation component. However, it is moving forward in small doses. For example, the Forest is conducting some work to clear off slides that happened over the winter.
- There is a need to recognize that improving roads means improving access and the ability to do all the other work. There’s potential funding with the State of Alaska, Tribes, and through the infrastructure bill. Can we do a better job of story-telling the importance of this work and how integral it is to everything else?

- It would be great if Tribes received this information and there were opportunities to consult and possibly support projects within their areas. This can strengthen relationships and save a lot of elbow grease on all sides.

Project-Specific Input

Input is organized by “Priority Project Areas, Project Area Name”.

- Yakutat, Sitka Watershed
 - There is probably 20 years of work to do up here. Is anyone able to partner in this area? Rob says that the Tribe has been doing this work quietly for a while. Their tribal transportation program is very on it. Water restoration and tribal transportation are talking to each other. Aquatic Organism Passage (AOP) pipes are easy to put on the list but hard to do. Trout Unlimited is stepping up to the plate. Happy to see Yakutat on this list and things are moving in a good direction here. It's a small town so we'll see how this work progresses.
- Hoonah/Admiralty, Game Creek
 - There are \$7 million restoration dollars secured for this area. The Tribe is still negotiating this agreement with the Forest.
- Sitka, Corner Bay and False Island
 - Recommend putting Corner Bay and False Island together by combining the work on the document for False Island using funding from the Great American Outdoors Act. It all relates. These areas are a logical fit and both are within the Peril Bay basin. Count Andrew Thoms in for helping out on these areas.
- Petersburg, Kupreanof Island
 - Is there a **QUIDT** for this project? There is a Record of Decision (ROD) on central Kupreanof that needs to be revisited. Projects in Portage Bay and Kake fall within the CE category. Part of the intent moving forward is for partners to be involved in IRM planning.
 - There are many CE cleared areas here. YG on the road system is cleared, especially if it meets local capacity. All thinning opportunities and AOP work are NEPA cleared. There was a lot of interest in recreation opportunities in this area. The Forest has more NEPA cleared YG and OG in this area than the area has capacity for.
 - There is good community history here, e.g., an Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) that was partner led. There is an opportunity to jumpstart what they were talking about at the **(SOC)** workshop, to streamline all the objectives - whether on capacity or on the NEPA side of things. These ranger districts here have done a lot.
 - There are a lot of existing efforts that need to be synchronized.
- Petersburg, N Kuiu
 - There's a lot of work happening here already, or under contract, e.g., ongoing invasive species treatment, and we are looking at travel management with this project. We are working with Bob Christensen, **OCK**, Trout Unlimited, and Shaak Seet Incorporated. There is a good plan here, and the IDT is helping to get it refined. **KKCFP** also helps out here.

- It is a hard area to access. People may not have personally visited or may not understand the infrastructure. There are plans for getting people out to see the road systems, portage trail, etc. in May.
- Ketchikan, Ward Creek/Lake Priority Watershed
 - For the Ward Creek project, work is going well and within the capacity of their crew. The Forest recommends that Rob contact Ranger Ty and John Hide.
- Ketchikan, Shelter Cove
 - In 1992, the road was connected to Carroll inlet. This opened up a new road system for the community. However, there was a lot of work on the South Favilla integrated resource project that was shelved in early 2021. This is good IRM. If there are small scale opportunities, at least it is connected to the road system so people can have access for recreation and otherwise.
 - I like that this will be a priority for the Forest. The Mental Health Trust (Trust) has an area out here – there could be some efficiencies in this if the timing works out. The Trust also has plans for Shelter Cove and Leese Lake for pre-commercial thinning (PCT) and harvesting YG.
 - Rod Cadmus from Southeast Alaska Watershed Coalition Would like to know more about this project and be involved with learning more.
- Prince of Wales, Staney Basin
 - This area has some of the oldest YG opportunities on the Island, mostly on the beach and along the road system. There were some OG units analyzed under PAULA that would be good for small scale harvest, and we could do co-intent acres. Thinning in non-development areas could accelerate OG structure.
 - Staney Creek is a large drainage, but the number of proposed acres here are relatively small. I am interested in what these would look like. The economics of moving an operation in and out is significant. There's a feasibility issue, and concern about implementation of restoration when you're doing a little here and a little there.
 - Dennis Nickerson's group is focusing on this area – it is important as they are expanding onto the Tongass. They are seeing an increase in invasive plants. How can we learn from what happened on Kuprenof and apply those learnings here? This is a heavily used area for access for cultural harvest and other access needs. They are trying to keep these areas open for safe harvest and access for firewood.
 - Rob Cadmus is glad to see red pipes on the list. He supports AOP projects especially in that drainage.
- Prince of Wales, Thorne Bay Basin
 - These are treatments in heavily logged areas from back in the '70s. They are at the alternative development stage. The Forest is currently responding to information received during scoping.

Next Steps

- This is preliminary work. More detailed comments/feedback/partnership support from the TTC would be helpful as the Forest is setting up teams and looking at specific projects. Please continue to offer specific comments. If anyone has other project ideas in these areas, now is a good time to

highlight those opportunities. The Forest needs ideas for projects, timing, and partners. District Rangers are a good initial point of contact for additional questions, project ideas, and to discuss partnership opportunities.

- The working list of projects and contact information for the District Ranges will be posted on Meridian's TTC website.