

Tongass Transition Collaborative

Next Steps

Background

The Tongass Transition Collaborative (TTC) represents a diverse range of groups and individuals from Southeast Alaska that includes tribal governments, business associations, conservation groups, ANCSA corporations, concerned citizens and others.

The TTC was initially formed in 2022 to provide a backwards looking assessment and present day recommendations to the US Forest Service (USFS) on their efforts to achieve the 5 young growth (YG) goals contained in the 2016 Forest Plan.

The original scope of work for the TTC was completed in May of 2023. During this process there was interest expressed by TTC participants and the USFS supporting staff to continue meeting as a group if a meaningful mission could be identified and a reasonable level of surety that the groups ongoing efforts to collaborate and provide input to the USFS would have a lasting impact on forest management activities.

The TTC Mission

Three sets of activities were identified in the May meeting as being timely and supportive of Tongass forest management and its impact on community sustainability, including:

1. Consultation on current NEPA projects and plans
2. Current SASSfm efforts and SASS Investments 2.0
3. The TLMP Revision

The TTC believes that these three sets of activities, if appropriately supported by the USDA and the State of Alaska in partnership, represent a clear, meaningful and measurable starting point for the group's mission over the next 3-5 years. The TTC proposes to meet virtually on an at least quarterly basis, and in-person two times per year. We would like to see these meetings continue to be supported by professional facilitation and the technical (e.g. young growth supply, deer habitat carrying capacity, etc.) and cultural expertise (e.g. culture wood guidance, workforce development, etc.) necessary to inform the group's discussions. Additionally, the TTC would like to see Tongass leadership continue to attend these meetings, especially those who lead the SASS initiatives and those responsible for overseeing the TLMP revision process.

Consultation on Current NEPA

In the short-term, i.e. immediately, the TTC could help the USFS with “high-level” assessments of current NEPA projects with the goals of avoiding litigation and improving outcomes for Tongass communities. This mission came as a request directly from USFS staff seeking an expanded level of social license to see its efforts in completing NEPA to result in implementation. More consultation with USFS staff is necessary to flesh out this mission but here are some potential objectives for this effort:

1. Provide consultation on overall project Purpose and Need.
2. Provide consultation on real-world practicality of Integrated Resource Management practices.
3. Work to strengthen engagement from local communities.

SASSfm and SASS Investment 2.0

In the medium term, i.e. over the course of the next two years, the TTC could provide strategic advice to the USDA on the current SASSfm initiative with the goal of generating a second SASS investment and a refined strategy for the deployment of those funds.

We believe that the USDA should aggressively invest in the region with recognition that the initial SASS actions, especially the negation of the “bridge timber” portion of the Transition strategy developed by the TAC, have put significant pressures on the region to “Transition” immediately. This will require investments to retool the forest products industry, to diversify the suite of economic and cultural benefits that come from Tongass Land Management and to develop the workforce and local business community to build the future forest economy.

Toward these ends, the TTC requests a substantial second SASSi investment be made by the USDA and for those funds to be held at the Denali Commission or similar entity that can provide the flexibility necessary for an effective strategy to develop from this effort. This would help address the group's concerns about the durability of USDA decisions informed by the group. These dollars could begin funding high priority SASSfm projects, including existing and new community forests and adding workforce and market development components to internal USFS and community derived SASSfm projects. Initial objectives for the TTC in this regard could include:

1. Refine SASSfm project prioritization.
2. Design market and workforce development components for SASSfm projects.
3. Develop an annual community input process for identification of new projects in future years.

TLMP Revision

Over the longer term, the TTC could build on the lessons learned through NEPA and SASS consultation to inform the TLMP revision process. Given that the USFS is in the “pre-scoping”

phase of the TLMP revision, the group could immediately begin to inform the process but with an understanding that the focus of the group's mission would gradually shift over the next couple of years to inform the TLMP revision. More discussion is necessary to flesh this set of activities out but initial objectives here could include:

1. Education of the TTC on the overall revision process.
2. Consideration for how to leverage community engagement processes developed for NEPA consultation and SASS 2.0 to inform the TLMP revision process.
3. Initial consultation on the Purpose and Need for the TLMP revision.

TTC Growth and Development

We recognize that the TTC as it is currently assembled may need to expand and evolve from its initial cohort to include more community connections, more business representatives, more policy expertise, etc. With the help of professional facilitation, we expect the group to serve as a networking hub for regional consultation on how the USDA can maximize local benefits from its efforts in the region. In addition to the three sets of activities described above, it is understood that the group will do some work to improve its own capacity, including:

1. Expand on the three sets of activities to develop a more comprehensive mission statement that expresses the values and vision of the group.
2. Strengthen communications between the TTC and tribal and rural communities throughout the region.
3. Identify strategies and mechanisms to increase the durability of decisions informed by the TTC, especially in the face of Administrative turnover in the federal government.