

# Thorne Bay Basin Integrated Resource Management Project

## TTC Meeting Notes

THURSDAY, MARCH 21<sup>ST</sup>, 2024

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### Participants

Forest Service staff present included Delilah Brigham, Greg Dunn, Hannah Harris, Jon Markovich, Kenneth Ostrom, Kevin Garter, Malcolm Cross, Mitchell Ferrell, Molly Simonson, Nick Reynolds, and Quentin Hall. Follow up questions can be emailed to [kenneth.ostrom@usda.gov](mailto:kenneth.ostrom@usda.gov).

Tongass Transition Collaborative (TTC) and Young Growth Think Tank participants were Aaron Prussian, Andrew Thoms, Austin Williams, Daniel O'Leary, Georgia Reid, Jesse Gehrke, Julia Nave, Michael Kampnich, Michael Cooney, Robert Christensen, Robert Venables, and Scott Leorna.

Meridian facilitation staff in attendance were Connie Lewis, Tori Anderson, and Emily Bruyn.

### Meeting Materials

- Meeting materials, including maps referenced during the meeting, are available [here](#).
- The Forest Service's Thorne Bay project website is [here](#).

### Presentation Summary

The meeting started with a brief overview of the project and an introduction to the maps that would be referenced. Key points from the presentation:

- Gaps in the map coding correspond to un-harvestable areas, including muskegs, recently cut areas, and old growth.
- Potential treatments include even-aged management, two-aged management, co-intent, and corridor treatments, as currently quantified in the following table:

Treatment	Total stand area (acres)	Suitable for timber harvest (acres)	Maximum percent of stand area for harvest	Maximum opening size allowed (acres)	Estimated actual harvest (acres)
Even-aged Management	2,612	2,246	100%	100	1,797
Two-aged Management	1,174	1,016	50%	20	406
Co-intent	124	103	33%	10	27
Corridor	1,220	781	33%	10	206
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,132</b>	<b>4,146</b>			<b>2,437</b>

- Phase I of the project includes the timber that is most mature right now. During the 15-years covered by the NEPA assessment, there will be additional phases to enable harvesting as other stands mature. Once NEPA-cleared, prescriptions can be adjusted slightly without needing additional NEPA clearance, based on what is encountered in specific stands.
- During the logging that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, many roads were built in riparian areas and/or were not properly restored. Roads often had undersized culverts, push/pull was not considered, and some roads were abandoned and closed vegetatively. In the project area, there are 52 aquatic organism passages (AOPs) under road crossings, 18 on closed roads. This project provides opportunities to open abandoned roads for current logging, then remove old culverts and other structures to cost-effectively increase habitat available to fish.
- In some instances, new roads will be required to enable uphill cabling (which is less damaging than previous logging methods), avoid having to use existing old roads that crossed streams, and to deal with variability in site maturity that necessitates multiple entries over time (there may be some sites where some trees are harvestable as much as 20 years before others).

## Q&A and Comments Summary

- Question: How were the wildlife corridors in the area identified, what were the goals in creating them, and were there areas specifically targeted where wildlife would be expected to concentrate?
  - The corridors were identified by biologists conducting field reconnaissance – focusing on where deer and game trails are distributed.
  - Timber unit locations within the wildlife corridors were adjusted so as to lower impact. Actual harvest locations within the timber focused polygons will be determined in the future based on the location of the corridors. Smaller corridors will be utilized to connect old growth so there is more functional deer winter habitat available.
  - In wildlife emphasis units, there can be some PCT/biomass harvest and within elevational corridors, there will be a focus on uneven management potential.

- Given that the landscape is such a mess right now due to previous logging, it is difficult to know whether wildlife would actually use the identified corridors. There are some elevational opportunities in the corridors, and connecting old growth makes sense. Otherwise, the corridors do not necessarily align with deer ecology. Better maps showing features important to wildlife would help.
- It would be helpful to have additional visualization tools that better display harvest locations, as well as intended prescriptions for after harvest.
- The Forest should focus on improving conditions across the whole area in the long-term – considering silvicultural conditions for rotational forestry, wildlife habitat, and infrastructure for doing the work on the ground - including harvest, thinning, and habitat treatments - and with consideration for access.
- This environmental assessment can serve as a model for logical, defensible assessment methodology and decision making for future timber sales in the Tongass.
- Question: How are staff thinking about stand maturity age and volume estimates?
  - Maturity is variable even within the same unit. Deeper analysis of stand maturity will be provided later in the NEPA process, as determinations are made about which alternatives will advance. Regarding volume, there is a minimum threshold right now and more data will emerge as stands are monitored going forward.
  - The stands that are mature now, which were all cut at roughly the same time, probably were on better-quality sites to begin with. This reality will continue to be a factor in determining harvest schedules moving forward.
- It is important to look at production across the area instead of focusing just on individual stand volume. This may require homing in on specific areas within a unit rather than averaging production for the whole unit. Whatever is done with this first young growth project is going to set the stage moving forward, so this is very important.
- It is important to connect this site-specific plan with a regional management philosophy that supports a vision for the timber industry and for wildlife habitat.
- Staff comment: Areas harvested more recently faced more restrictions than areas harvested in the more distant past – which means they now usually encounter less ‘fall down’ in volume because unsuitable areas would have already been identified and removed from the consideration. But in the Thorne Bay Basin, which was harvested before many restrictions were implemented to protect resources, essentially the whole area was harvested regardless of resource impacts. The way harvest occurred in the past (i.e., with or without restrictions for resource protection) across different resource conditions has a significant impact on how and what we can harvest today.
- Question: What is the timeline for this project?
  - The Environmental Assessment (EA) should be finalized no later than December 2024. Feedback is welcome! Discussions like the one today help staff understand what the

public wants, and how to address concerns. The Forest is trying to improve its communication tools, so comments on digestibility of information are useful.

- The Forest should make a more substantial attempt to explain the science behind decision making by translating information so it can be understood and so that it is accessible to people who are not intimately familiar with an area.
- The Mule Deer Foundation is considering doing a pre- and post- impact monitoring survey as a way of generating more data about how deer are actually using habitat. This information is critical and needs to be collected over time if we are going to focus on improving habitat. Suitable habitat is variable over time as conditions evolve. We need better population monitoring data so that wildlife habitat decisions are based on the best science.
  - Staff comment: The state is transitioning to camera-based rather than helicopter-based monitoring approaches, so this may change some things. But it is clear we need better monitoring data to understand what we are doing.
- Question: Why is an EA rather than an EIS (Environmental Impact Statement) deemed appropriate for this project?
  - An EA is appropriate in this instance because significant impact is unlikely. The Forest's approach with this project is to eliminate any project components that could lead to significant impact (and thus require an EIS). If/when that is not feasible, then the project will be elevated and require an EIS. But the hope is to eliminate significant impacts, have a light touch, address pre-existing concerns, and leave the landscape in a better condition than before the project was initiated. Even without an EIS this project represents a new type of integrated approach considering a lot of variables, which is why it has taken so long.
- Question: How is the FS considering community needs, especially around subsistence?
  - There are plans to eventually hold a subsistence hearing on the Island, after plans are a little farther along.
- Digestibility of information and a substantive focus on how management impacts the deer population will be especially important for that hearing.
- Question: Is there a sense yet of how to prioritize the consistent, long-term distribution of small timber sales over time? And how will the proportion of timber sales designated for large versus small sales be determined?
  - There is no constraint right now regarding the size of timber sales. The volume that is mature and available for harvest will influence how sales are packaged. That determination occurs after NEPA clearance, at which time it can be possible to allocate small versus large sales to accommodate local capacity and need.

## Next Steps

- The TTC will be meeting virtually, and in-person May 8-9 in Ketchikan. The TTC can discuss the Thorne Bay Basin EA again at that meeting if desired.
- The Forest is currently developing alternatives for the Thorne Bay EA. There will be additional opportunities for public input when those alternatives are released, and Forest staff are always willing to schedule follow-up meetings on the subject with this group at any time. They appreciate the value this group has in communicating the Forest's work to a larger audience.
- The Forest has another NEPA project - on Stoney Creek - coming up later this year. It will entail a substantial public pre-scoping period. They would appreciate TTC's input on that project as well when the time comes.