

The Tongass Collaborative – TLMP Revision Draft Assessment & Member Updates

February 18, 2025

Final Virtual Meeting Summary

Call Attendees: Tessa Axelson, Jim Baichtal, Delilah Brigham, Bob Christensen, Clarence Clark, Steve Connelly, Mike Cooney, Jeremy Douse, Jason Gubatayao, Michael Kampnich, Brian Kleinhenz, Jen Leahy, Scott Leorna, Erin Mathews, Julia Nave, Monique Nelson, Katherine Prussian, Jillian Schuyler, Sheila Spores, Andrew Thoms, Robert Venables, Austin Williams

Staff: Connie Lewis and Maddi Schink

Tongass Land Management Plan Revision

Erin Mathews, Tongass Land Management Plan (TLMP) Revision Coordinator, provided an overview of the TLMP revision process and of the recently released assessment, and responded to TTC member questions. The PowerPoint Erin used for her presentation is available as an attachment and will be posted at <https://tongasslandmgmt.org/ttc-meetings-and-events/>.

Other helpful Resources Include:

- [Tongass National Forest Plan Revision Website](#)
- [Draft Assessment](#)
- [Tongass Plan Revision Comment Site](#) (Comment submission for Draft Assessment)
- [Plan Revision Engagement Opportunities](#) (Revision Team Office Hour Information)

The [Draft Assessment](#) for the TLMP revision was released on January 10, 2025. It is comprised of 21 sections that are available individually on the project web site at [Tongass National Forest - Planning](#). A User Guide, which is also posted, introduces the format and context for how the Assessment was

developed. The primary author of the Assessment is the Pacific Planning Services Group, but all contributors are listed here: [Assessment Contributors](#).

The planning team is asking for feedback on the Draft Assessment sections, such as factual corrections, additional data sources, references, comments, sub-topics that you would like added, and other ideas, and/or any questions that remain. Please submit comments at the [Tongass Plan Revision Comment Site](#) by **February 24, 2025**. You are welcome to join us for our Revision Office Hours if you have any questions or want assistance on how to navigate the available documents.

This is not the end of the conversation, nor the only source of information for the Pan and environmental analysis; any comments that come in after the February 24 date will still inform the revision and subsequent phases. We will consider all feedback received and update the individual sections into final versions, which will be shared when they are completed later this year. At that time, we will also create an integrated Final Assessment Report, which will consolidate the findings from all the sections and describe the interactions among resources.

In the coming year we will be moving into the next phase of our revision process - Plan development. We need to sort through some staffing challenges but are looking forward to continuing our engagement with you to make sure we are on the right track. Please stay tuned to our Plan Revision Website at [Tongass National Forest - Planning](#) for upcoming engagement opportunities and to leave comments. There are also revision office hours – during which planning staff are available to respond to questions – which are conducted by zoom on the first Tuesday of the month from 10-11 am and on the third Tuesday of the month from 5-6 pm.

The Pacific Northwest Research Station stand-alone study is expected to be available in March 2025. It may be used in Plan development depending on the timeline. The Forest does not assume that the study will inform timber demand.

Regarding the Roadless Rule, current policy mandates that any Plan components that are applicable to inventoried roadless areas will be compatible with restrictions. As of now, per the Alaska Resources Executive Order, the President has directed a review of the current 2023 Roadless Rule. There is no other information available at this time about how this will impact the revision process.

COMMENTS AND Q&A FROM TTC MEMBERS

- Some of the timelines seem really compressed.

Response: The Plan timelines are mandated by the Plan Revision Rule. However, possible revisions to NEPA processes could result in some steps being expedited. There is no further guidance available at this time on possible NEPA changes, and any case, they wouldn't be relevant in this process until next year.

- One of the steps after the comment period is to integrate the sections; what does that integration look like? There are a lot of sections that are similar and that overlap.

Response: The intent is to not only release final versions of the 21 sections in early summer 2025 but also to create an integrated version that pulls in all the key findings and the needs for change into a compiled/integrated version that is slated to be released at the same time as the 21 sections.

- I was assuming that the timber assessment section was going to be more of a performance evaluation of the last Forest Plan but in the Draft Assessment it is more about the current state of the Tongass; can you help clarify the purpose of this piece?

Response: The intent of the Assessment is to provide the basis for identifying the need for change. The Assessment looks at current conditions and current management for specific resources – i.e., where we are at with our current Forest Plan, what needs to change to address the changes in the Tongass in the past 20 years, what is needed to conform to current planning policy, what Plan content doesn't work for where we are now, and what are the broad-level changes and edits that we need for the new Plan. The Assessment is not necessarily a performance report, but rather looks at current conditions, what we might anticipate in the next 10 years, and what needs to change for each resource.

- The Tongass Transition Collaborative (TTC) is a well-informed and engaged group representing interests across the region. The group might be interested in developing a TTC alternative to put into the planning mix; can you speak about what that could look like and how it might be received?

Response: Erin has had this question from a lot of collaborators. It is exciting to have folks with local expertise come forward with alternatives/feedback for this process. Feel free to always invite Forest staff to your meetings. They can describe the current state of the Plan revision process and are eager to take local feedback into account throughout the revision process.

- It seems like the need for change may require more of the local perspective and the perspective of Forest staff who are on-the-ground in the region; Is this the part of the process where they plug in more than the Pacific Planning group, etc.? It seems like the people who have observed resource impacts on the ground should shape the need for change.

Response: The Pacific Planning group cannot move forward without on-the-ground / local knowledge and understanding. We need that local input externally and internally. The foundation of the Plan is provided by the revision teams, and a key part of their work is engagement at the district level.

- What is the best way to get that external perspective? Engage with district offices?

Response: We are facing significant budget and staffing constraints but are hoping to continue to foster external engagement to get input about what communities need and want from the Tongass. Extensive external engagement is built into the revision process, but we might need to shift/flex moving forward.

Member updates and input regarding near-term TTC priorities

- **Michael Cooney, AK State Dept of Natural Resources:** Mike is involved in timber sales and development, helping with an inventory on the Kenai peninsula, and in the process of drafting comments on the Draft Assessment for the non-federal members of the Landowners Group (LOG). Terra Verde has a review underway to identify lessons learned from GNA projects and to make recommendations about how those projects can operate more smoothly in the future. Connie Lewis is helping with this review; she will be contacting several people on this call in the near future to schedule interviews.
- **Brian Kleinhenz, Terra Verde:** Is working on acquiring integrated mapping and inventory information for a working lands analysis to create a comprehensive picture of second growth inventory and growth rates in SE Alaska – encompassing both federal and private lands, with work hopefully wrapping up in the second quarter of this year.
- **Jeremy Douse, State Department of Forestry:** A couple of timber-related pieces of legislation (SB75, HB72) have been introduced in the legislature. The State is looking at additional leasing on State land for timber production, proposing additions to the state forest system, and is planning to build up its Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) program. Jeremy is helping to coordinate DOF comments for the TLMP Draft Assessment along with other State agencies. There are several staff positions open in the Department, including a Deputy position, legislative liaison, inventory forester and two resource foresters in SE AK.
- **Sheila Spores, Tongass National Forest:** Folks from the Regional Office and at the Forest level are involved in all levels of the TLMP Draft Assessment; the whole Forest was provided the opportunity to see an overview of the entire draft Plan. The Assessment development process has been pretty robust; she has been deeply involved and has been delving into Forest Plan modeling. We are going to have much more robust young growth data compared to what was available in 2016.
- **Tessa Axelson, Alaska Forest Association (AFA):** AFA will hold its spring meeting on March 18 in Juneau. The meeting will cover all three of its regions and include a town hall style session with the timber committee. AFA is continuing to expand its State-wide membership. As the timber supply crisis in SE Alaska continues AFA is focusing on long-term solutions. Moving federal land to the State for State management is a priority, and we are trying to understand the new administration's framework and transitions.
- **Clarence Clark, Alaska Forest Association:** AFA has a wonderful scholarship program with this year's applications opening on March 1 and closing on April 30. The program is available for AFA associate or general members as well as for their children and grandchildren. More information will go out to members via email soon. The program provides four to eight scholarships per year to post-secondary students, undergraduate students, and for those seeking law and graduate degrees. The program has been re-designed to also support individuals going into trade careers. It usually gives \$5,000 to \$12,000 per year. There have been over 250 scholarship recipients since the program's inception in the 1960s.

- **Steve Connelly, State Department of Natural Resources:** Steve noted that there isn't a stable enough supply of timber to keep the industry afloat. We need young growth volume for economic viability.
- **Andrew Thoms, Sitka Conservation Society:** Engineered plans for young growth utilization are being prepared using the new lumber grading specs – the plans are out and ready. We are also doing work on Forest Service cabins but are running up against the federal funding freeze as we try to get work set up for the summer season. The funding freeze is also impacting pre-commercial thinning (PCT) projects – they could be set back a year unless funding becomes available soon. We are scrambling to figure out how we and our partners are going to move forward in light of the current funding, NEPA and staffing challenges. The challenge is NOW because we all have to purchase gear and hire folks for the upcoming field season.
- **Austin Williams, Trout Unlimited (TU):** Last season TU fixed five culverts, removed 54 others and did maintenance and closure on four and a half road miles. We are conducting engineering work on nine culverts on Prince of Wales for the coming season and doing procurement and design work in Yakutat. The federal funding pause is the most significant barrier at the moment, resulting in having to halt work on all contracts. The firings that have taken place over the past couple of days are a significant cause for concern at federal agencies and are already impacting our ability to achieve our mission and implement projects.
- **Robert Venables, Southeast Conference:** Later next week the results of the bioeconomy zone on Prince of Wales Island will be released. We are trying to build a body of work that can guide policy and forestry on the island. The report presents both opportunities and challenges that provide a framework and roadmap for what needs to be addressed to create a durable, place-based economy and attract biobased development
- **Scott Leorna, Mule Deer Foundation:** The federal funding freeze means we are on pause for 2,000 acres of PCT projects and for two regional projects (assessment and prioritization of habitat restoration for which we have established a collaborative working group (HERDS)).
- **Julia Nave, The Nature Conservancy:** A lot of our Forest Service agreements are on pause due to the federal funding freeze. If some of this work doesn't happen during this field season, the funds will be a loss for the Tongass. We are trying to elevate that message to the right people. We don't have a formal stop-work order, but it is too risky to move forward with contractor invoices given uncertainty about whether they will ever be paid. All of this is tricky with the field season coming up so soon. We do have private funding for community and tribal stewardship crews on Prince of Wales Island in April to share knowledge and do cross-training (i.e., navigation, data collection, field skills relevant to the region). We are working with the SE AK Watershed Coalition (SAWC) to host this training this year.
- **Robert Venables, SE Conference:** Robert responded to a question about whether there is a plan if federal funding doesn't come through? In response Robert said that Southeast Conference is looking at what will happen in the next four to six months depending on litigation, etc., and believes in the meantime we all need to do as much as we can with philanthropies and nonprofits. There is an appetite to explore new policy solutions, but it is too early for clarity on how all of this will shake

out. Connie mentioned that she is working with Robert to formalize the arrangement whereby the TTC is a regional initiative within Southeast Conference. She also clarified that she is working with Jim Elieser on TTC funding; a significant grant request is probably stalled due to the federal funding situation, but she and Jim are working on other funding options as well.

Review Action Steps

- Members should feel free to reach out to Erin Mathews at any time with questions, ideas, comments, etc. related to the TLMP revision process.
- There is an upcoming Town Hall with Senator Murkowski that may touch on topics of concern to the TTC membership.
- Connie will conduct outreach to members and possibly schedule another call in the fairly near future regarding possible additional next steps. For example, might TTC help collect and compile information about the kinds and numbers and implications of projects that are on hold due to the federal funding freeze - to possibly share with policymakers.
- Connie will circulate a draft summary of this meeting for review by all attendees and will incorporate comments/suggested edits into a final version that will be distributed to the TTC membership and posted on the TTC website.