

Southeast Conference
March 21, 2006

Comments of: Forrest Cole, Tongass National Forest Supervisor

Maintaining access to and use of public resources is a critical element in achieving economic stability for the communities of southeast Alaska. Since 1979, when I arrived in southeast Alaska, this debate has been present, and in the last few years, it has reached new levels of dissent.

Today I am once again announcing Forest Service intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement to correct the deficiencies in our Forest Plan found by the Ninth Circuit Court relating to timber demand, range of alternatives, and cumulative effects of timber harvesting on State and private ownerships. In addition, I intend to correct and update the plan on issues the Forest Service has identified since the plan was signed in 1997. This effort will provide us with a comprehensive review of the Plan, as well as new information that has been developed since its inception.

The State of Alaska has agreed to be a cooperating agency in this effort. Both the Forest Service and the State of Alaska will provide significant resources to the project in order to produce a document that is on schedule and that is supportable. I will make the final decision on the new Plan amendments.

I signed the Notice of Intent to prepare this document yesterday; it will be published in the Federal Register soon. We will use the 1982 Planning Rule rather than the recently published 2005 Rule, because the Court's decision calls for an EIS, and because many interested parties have asked that the Plan be amended with the same rules that developed it.

The Pacific Northwest Research Station has prepared a new timber demand analysis as a result of the Court's decision. The demand analysis is a key component of the amendment process because it is the science that lets us directly address one of the Court's findings. I have read through the document, after the peer review was completed, and I believe the scenarios it presents will allow us to chart a future course for the Forest that will provide long-term vitality for the communities of southeast Alaska, and significant conservation of pristine landscapes.

I intend to work with the communities of southeast Alaska, and "communities of interest" throughout the Nation, to develop alternatives around the demand analysis scenarios. The draft EIS will be published by the end of November of this year, followed by a 90-day comment period. Unlike many previous planning processes, however, this amendment process has been open to the public since January when a new website was opened specifically for the project. The site, found at <http://tongass-fpadjust.net>, provides background information, continuous updates on progress, and opportunities for the public to present their views and input to the process. The timber demand analysis will be posted on the website when it becomes available. I expect this to be soon.

The centerpiece of our current Forest Plan is a conservation strategy that protects the biological heart of the Tongass – the most significant areas for wildlife and fish, among other values. It was designed to assure sustainability for all resources and values, while allowing development on a relatively small portion of the Tongass to make opportunities available to communities in southeast Alaska. Extensive unmodified natural environments characterize the Tongass, and will continue to do so under the updated Plan.

I intend to complete the planning process by July, 2007 to maintain stability for southeast Alaska's wood products industry and the Forest's timber program. Currently there are about two

years of wood supply remaining for our local, family-run mills. However, this is currently being jeopardized by a new request for injunction by plaintiffs in the ongoing litigation battle of most every project recently decided.

The 1997 Plan took 13 years and nearly 13 million dollars to produce. The litigation, claims and time spent on the 1999 Modified Decision, as well as on the 2001 Roadless Rule, added more time and money. The 2003 Wilderness analysis decision added an additional two million dollars to the planning cost; additional litigation increased this cost over one million more in attorney fees and claims. Now we are investing an additional two million to respond to the current Court order. This adds up to more than 18 million dollars.

I believe the money spent on this planning effort, litigation, claims, not to mention people's time, could be put to better use. I also believe the communities of southeast Alaska deserve to know what can and can not be counted on for their future economies. Communities like Wrangell are tired of waiting for something to happen when opportunities surround them on the National Forest.

I am looking for the plan to be finalized once again in July, 2007 so we can get on with the business of implementation, rather than constant litigation. I intend to work with each of the communities in southeast so that they have full understanding of the current situation, and so that they take an active role in building a final decision that the Forest can implement. If you elect not to participate, expect others, outside of southeast to plan your future for you. If you are willing to take an active interest, I will commit to make all the resources available to make this effort the last so that we can begin to stabilize our communities' futures.

What we've been doing the past ten years clearly is not working, for anyone – except maybe for a few lawyers. The only way I see

out of the “conflict pit” we’re mired in, is for all of us to work creatively to build a plan that meets our cumulative interests in the “radical center”. If that means that the fringes are left behind, so be it. I ask you to get engaged. I will make myself available to help you do it.

Thank you.

If you have questions, I will answer them now, if you would like to discuss further I will be available.