



10. FORESTS: Timber sale upheld for Alaska's Tongass (09/10/2009)

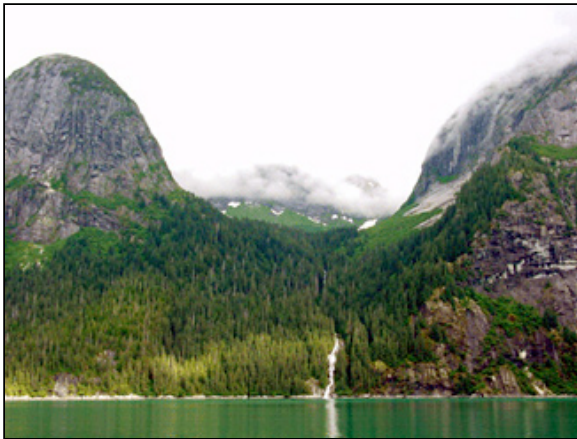
Eryn Gable, special to E&E

Forest Service officials want to move ahead with a timber sale in southeast Alaska's Tongass National Forest that could produce 73 million board feet of timber, despite concerns that the logging would interfere with one of the primary wildlife corridors on Prince of Wales Island.

After several meetings with environmental groups that had appealed the Logjam timber sale, Tongass National Forest Supervisor Forrest Cole last week rejected a "conservation alternative" put forward by the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council, Audubon Alaska and Alaska Wilderness League that would have cut the allowed harvest for the sale in half and sought to limit negative impacts to fish by allowing the construction of fewer roads.

Cole's **decision** to stand by the original timber sale means the appeals filed by local and national environmental groups in July will be decided by regional forester Denny Bschor, the highest Forest Service authority in Alaska. He is expected to issue a decision by Sept. 24.

Cole argued that the proposal did not provide enough stability to the timber industry in southeast Alaska because of the reduced timber volume and would not meet the objectives of the 2008 Forest Plan Amendment, which sought to resolve many of the conflicts over the Tongass timber program. Implementation of the Logjam project is part of that plan.



The Tongass National Forest is home to many species including salmon, black bears, eagles, Sitka black-tailed deer and a wide variety of birds. Courtesy of USGS.

In addition, Cole expressed concern that adopting the conservation alternative would result in several delays that would create further hardship for loggers, mill owners and their employees and families, who already face uncertainty because of reduced timber supply from the Tongass. The proposal would have required a new decision on the project and a new appeal period, further delaying any timber sale until late 2010, he argued.

"We'd have no options to make up that volume, so the timber industry would essentially be shut down waiting for us to get back through the environmental analysis again," Cole said.

Furthermore, Cole said adopting the conservation alternative would not have resolved all of the appeals, since three of the four groups of appellants did not support it. The other appellants include the Sierra Club and Greenpeace, which filed a joint appeal, Cascadia Wildlands and the Sitka Conservation Society.

"It became apparent that if we were to accept the proposal presented to us, we would need to reissue our decision and go

back through the appeals process and potentially still have three of four appellants not happy with our decision," Cole said.

Reaction

But Gabe Scott, Alaska representative for Cascadia Wildlands, said his group would not have blocked the conservation alternative if Cole had decided to adopt it.

"The supervisor misread that situation," Scott said. "He's just using that as an excuse."

However, Scott did say that his group would still have wanted the Forest Service to remove culverts that are blocking salmon passage, regardless of which alternative the supervisor chose. The culvert issue is the main focus of the group's appeal.

Scott Harris, conservation solutions coordinator for the Sitka Conservation Society, said his group never expected Cole to endorse the alternative and that he did not know whether his group would have dropped its appeal had Cole chosen the proposal.

"They've just been so resistant to partnering and collaborating that we didn't see any chance they'd accept it, so it's a question we didn't really have to address," he said.

Harris did say that the conservation alternative would not have achieved all his group's conservation objectives or helped local communities achieve the resiliency they need to survive in the current economic climate. The conservation alternative is truly a compromise alternative, but not one his group supports, he said.

"This landscape has been so hammered that we're not willing to compromise," Harris said.

"We're hoping that [regional forester Bschor] is able to see the benefits, not only to the agency and the industry and to the land, but also the goodwill this would create that could help us move forward here in the forest," said Buck Lindekugel, conservation director and staff attorney for the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council.

Lindekugel rejected Cole's contention that adopting the conservation alternative would require the Forest Service to issue a new decision, noting that it fitted within the range of alternatives the Forest Service considered.

"The Forest Service has a tremendous amount of discretion," Lindekugel said. "What they seem to lack is a willingness to exercise that discretion in new and creative ways."

Tim Bristol, Alaska program director for Trout Unlimited, which worked on developing the conservation alternative, said Cole's rejection of the proposal was "hugely disappointing" but not unexpected.

"Everything he does is through a logging lens," Bristol said of Cole. "He wants to get the cut out, and then the conservation measures, interests and needs are built around that cut."

Cole said he was not surprised by such criticism but stressed that the Forest Service is a multiple-use agency and that the agency must balance competing interests. "I honestly think that we've done a very good job looking at all the interests," he said.

The Forest Service sees the timber sale as vital to the local economy, saying that it will help the Tongass transition its timber program to rely more on young-growth timber from past harvest areas. Forest Service officials would like to develop enough timber to supply local mill operators and the local wood products industry for the next 15 to 20 years.

Owen Graham, executive director of the Alaska Forest Association, said sawmills in southeast Alaska need to have about three years of timber under contract, but some mills have less than a year of timber under contract right now. That makes it critical to move forward with the Logjam timber sale as soon as possible, he said.

"We need this timber sale," Graham said. "These guys are running out of wood. They don't have enough to get through the winter right now."

Graham also noted that only a very small portion of the Tongass National Forest is even available for timber harvesting. Of the 10 million acres of forested land in the 17-million-acre forest, 676,000 acres of commercial timberland is available for harvesting over the next century. And that includes 327,260 acres of roadless areas that environmentalists want placed off-limits to logging and another 180,000 acres of young timber that is not ready to be cut yet.

Graham expressed dismay that environmental groups want to reduce by half the amount of timber allowed under Logjam, especially since the project is located in an area that is already developed. "It just leaves nothing for the mills," he said.

About 3,400 acres of forest land would be harvested for timber under the Logjam timber sale, which covers a total area of more than 56,000 acres.

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