



Big Thorne Project

Date: June 28, 2013

Topic: Big Thorne Project, Thorne Bay Ranger District, Tongass National Forest

Background:

In 2010, the Forest Service proposed a Transition Framework that emphasizes a stewardship approach to support natural resource-based employment opportunities and rural development in Southeast Alaska. Providing enough timber harvest and stewardship projects for several years could allow timber operators to obtain necessary financial backing for retooling to utilize young-growth timber volume while offering stable employment to Southeast Alaska communities throughout the transition.

The initial Federal Register Notice of Intent (NOI) for the Big Thorne Project was published on February 11, 2011 and a scoping letter was sent to the project mailing list in February 2012. Public scoping meetings were held in Thorne Bay, Naukati, Coffman Cove, and Craig, Alaska, in late February and early March 2011. The DEIS was published in late October 2012.

Issue: The Tongass National Forest has released its Record of Decision (ROD) for the Big Thorne Timber Sale Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS). This decision allows the harvest of 148.9 MMBF of timber, which includes 6,186 acres of old growth and 2,299 acres of young growth, with 842 acres reserved for small sales. The project area is distributed over about 232,000 acres in Southeast Alaska on Prince of Wales Island, around the community of Thorne Bay and south of Coffman Cove. None of the harvest occurs in inventoried roadless areas. Economists estimate the Big Thorne project could provide an opportunity for 600-689 jobs in logging, sawmilling, transportation, and support businesses.

Key Points:

- The ROD selects Alternative Three with modifications. When compared to the Draft EIS, Alternative 3:
 - Includes 723 fewer acres of old growth timber and 273 fewer acres of young growth timber.
 - Reduces even-aged harvest (clear-cutting) of old growth timber by 23 percent, which is expected to lessen effects to biodiversity.
 - Allows construction of 46.1 miles of new road and reconstruction of 36.6 miles of existing NFS road, 10 fewer miles of road than proposed in the Draft Alternative Three.
 - Requires the closure of 15 miles of road, in or adjacent to, the Honker Divide during wolf trapping season, December 1 to May 1, in order to help maintain wolf sustainability.
 - Allows for 1,798 acres harvested in deer winter range, 587 fewer acres than proposed in the Draft EIS, Alternative 3.
 - Limits the annual harvest of timber in the North Big Salt Lake subwatershed to less than 20 percent in areas harvested within the past 30 years.
- Under this ROD, modifications have been made to some small Old Growth Reserves. A determination has been made that they are comparable to the goals and objectives of the Standard and Guides, as well as appendices D and K of the forest plan.
- The ROD allows for the project to be offered as a stewardship contract, which provides for the exchange of goods for services, or the use of timber receipts to fund watershed restoration projects in the Big Thorne project area.
- The project provides a sustained level of timber supply to meet annual and planning cycle demand.
- Using stewardship contracting allows the agency to foster continued collaboration, build capacity, and reduce the risk to contractors by allowing for longer-term contracts while accomplishing a wide range of watershed restoration projects on Prince of Wales Island.
- The project assists in keeping timber operators in business and the existing mills operating and encourages investment in the wood products industry as it transitions to include more young-growth harvests.
- The Big Thorne project area on Prince of Wales is in near proximity to existing Alaska road systems and sawmills, which provides economic efficiencies for the sales permitted by this decision.
- The Tongass National Forest Big Thorne Record of Decision is a critical step in the diversification of Southeast Alaska's economy that allows for a steady shift from old-growth timber harvests to young-growth harvests and forest restoration.

- The Big Thorne decision permits a 6- to 10-year supply of timber, which could provide stability to the industry, sustain jobs, and give sawmills the opportunity to retool to process smaller-diameter timber and to seek new markets. Meanwhile, the Forest Service will invest planning efforts in young-growth timber.

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