

Attendees: Mike Sheets, John Stevens, Jim Kelly, Frank Roberts, Jason Anderson, Dawne Sherman, Ralph Porter (Porter and Sons Lumber), Mike McKimmons, Bob Claus (SEACC) Keith Rush (The Nature Conservancy), James Stevens, Bill and Carolyn Thomason (WoodCuts of Alaska)

By phone: Elaine Price (Coffman Cove), Austin Williams (The Wilderness Society)

Attendees reviewed workshop agenda, agreements and purposes and re-visited the Desired Outcomes below;

Desired Outcome of Workshops:

1. Prioritize the List of Existing project / opportunities in the project area,
2. Identify missed opportunities and projects the FS should work on next
3. Define the projects (or types of projects) that should be integrated at implementation for better economic and ecological benefit

Ranger Anderson welcomed a new participant (Ralph Porter) and provided a quick review notes from last previous meetings, asking for any comments or edits? None received.

Jay – Here’s a refresher on what we’re doing regarding the Big Thorne Stewardship Area. A bunch of projects represent this range of opportunities to make jobs or improve conditions in the identified areas of Aquatics, Terrestrial Habitat, Access, Recreation, Subsistence, and Economics.

The basic questions for the group are: “What do we want to focus on? What have we missed? What stewardship contracting packages (projects) should we think about adding together (assuming the sale gets through the litigation process)?

Ralph – Do you need a contractor’s license to do the other (stewardship) work?

Jay – No, you don’t need to have a special contractor’s license, but you need to be able to perform the services requested.

Jay – To recap for those who are new to this process: In the first two workshops we spent a lot of time discussing purpose and agreements (read thru the list of agreements)

At the last meeting, we talked about aquatic management and identified the types of aquatic projects we usually work on (5 principal types). Recreation was covered as well.

Next step is to discuss the other sectors selected by the group (Veg/Habitat, Access and Subsistence).

Jay offered an important reminder to the group, that the next step in these workshops was to really explore local workforce interest and capacity, so as to gauge the interest in specific projects, types of projects and the scale at which the local industry operators would be willing to respond to solicitations for Stewardship Projects. Jay encouraged everyone to make contact with any of those local operators they may know, and ask them to attend the next workshop.

Discussion of Vegetation / Terrestrial Habitat Opportunities: Items listed in Bold are criteria suggested by the working group

Jay identified from the previous discussions and documents provided, that the most logical type of vegetation management / habitat enhancement actions, most readily implementable within the Stewardship area are generically covered by 1) pre-commercial thinning and 2) commercial thinning. Both activities can be performed to meet a variety of land objectives, such as habitat enhancement and /or timber production. The agency has already identified a large amount of this work, as a logical progression of management action within the Stewardship area (maps provided in previous Big Thorne workshops and available online www.staneycreek.org), and the value of the collaborative input is targeting which kinds of units to thin, and where to put the work (on the map/ground).

Mike Sheets, Forest Service Silviculturist described the 2 activities; the range of reasons the agency performs this work, the average cost per acre and the historical average number of acres thinned per year on POW; much of this info is provided in the Big Thorne Stewardship Area Opportunities document.

Jay -- We've already identified that there are commercial thinning or pre-commercial thinning (PCT) opportunities. It seems that the low hanging fruit in terrestrial habitat is in pct.

The agency has also elected to develop at least 1 alternative in the Big Thorne EIS project that will consider young growth Commercial Thinning (CT). Those stands represent those that are most likely to be viable for CT operations within 10 years. This alternative is being crafted in response to public comments offered on that project.

Frank – (with regard to the Big Thorne EIS Alternative) - We've looked at (CT) units by age, and a bit by stand structure, but not so much as by access, so some will be dropped.

Ranger Anderson offered the collaborative group a preview of the Big Thorne EIS DRAFT Alternative Maps at the next workshop.

Mike Sheets – For the Big Thorne PCT activities (as mapped and provided in the workshop documents)... We looked at what stands are going to be coming into the normal PCT window over the next 10 years. And we identified what land use designation (LUD) it would be in, and that will influence what the thinning treatment will be like. We may be able to help the wildlife needs and PCT needs at the same time; and meet a double objective. A lot of those areas are also riparian areas. So we can potentially do treatments /prescriptions to address all three. About 12k acres are involved: about 2,500 acres are in non development LUDs; 7,500 in beach estuary; and the rest are in development LUDs.

Mike Sheets – The Thorne Bay District typically thins about 2,000 acres per year. This could be covered by KV collections in an upcoming timber sale (Basically, KV funds are used to reforest areas after a sale).

Jay – Normally our contracts are 100-600 acres (each) per year on POW based on what purchasers can do. Fewer, larger contracts might provide more stability to the local economy. This discussion is ultimately about what is going to give the best bang for the buck.

Mike Sheets – We could be doing more thinning than we are doing now (based on what is coming into the window of availability) if we had more funds available.

Jay – Primary Purpose explanation: For PCT stands, that are no longer in a development LUD, the reason to thin them is typically a wildlife habitat enhancement. From a funding perspective, a wildlife purpose must be addressed with wildlife dollars (vs. fish dollars, timber dollars, etc.). Wildlife budgets on the Tongass have been traditionally very small. The ability to collect timber receipts under stewardship authority doesn't have those types of restrictions (retained receipts are quite flexible). So it might be best to get the lowest hanging fruit with available funds.

Keith – It sounds great to get several objectives met with one single thinning. Maybe this retained receipts concept is something to be considered. It might be good to thin the OGR that are about to leave the thinning window, or else could result in large amounts of slash later. Also, non-treatment of some stands is important too.

Mike – Yes, that's a good point. We need to be strategic about timing and treatments.

Jay – These are two areas we have identified. Wonders if there are there any other vegetation issues on the landscape that folks are interested in?

For PCT Actions in the Big Thorne Stewardship Area, which may rely on potential retained receipts (Stewardship Contracts) focus on 1) PCT units within the Old Growth Reserves and other Non-Development LUDS, 2) units in which treatment will achieve multiple objectives with a single thinning, regardless of underlying LUD, and 3) stands that are about to leave the PCT window and harder to work with in the future.

Mike – In OGRs, we are less likely to thin boundary to boundary; there will probably be much more of a diverse stand because there is no need to thin boundary to boundary on those units.

Jay – The actions we take on those stands now really lock us into a future course of action. There are positive gains on both sides (faster stand acceleration from thinning allows future actions to be implemented that will accelerate stand structure towards old growth characteristics, faster than it would by growing them without further treatments).

Jay - One interest not presented here at the meeting, is the one that supports the idea of not doing any thinning at all anywhere with young growth, in order to re-produce a certain type of timber. Not thinning after initial harvest would, over a long period of time (200 years or more) make a tree with a tight-grained, more typical old-growth saw-timber quality which is where the current wood-products industry is getting its value from. The Tongass thinning program has been unable to keep up with thinning needs anyway, so a small percent of the land base will be able to meet this need into the future.

Keith – Thinks it is better to have a variety out there (more diversity- like a stock portfolio)

Ralph Porter – If you keep thinning it all, you're going to have wood that's full of knots. I know they do that down South, and that's why they come up here for specialty wood. We can't compete with the mills out of Canada. So if you're going to keep this industry going, you have to have old growth spruce and cedar.

Mike Sheets – So I'm hearing a desire to manage some areas on a long rotation, and probably the closer to town the better.

Jay – Is not sure how to institutionalize this objective because of the length of the timeline.

Ralph – We have to ship out of here, so we can't compete with mills down South. There will never be a young growth industry here because of that.

Jay – In the past, lucrative markets here have been based on high value timber market. There are commodity markets right now that are proving to show value in young growth. It presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Export is not well embraced. But if we had more receipts, then we could support more wildlife habitat and vegetation management components.

Mike – For the most part, the trees you see in dark stands on the maps are about 40-45 years old, so they are too young to harvest now; they are going to happen later on in the Big Thorne sale (towards the end of planned the 10-yr sale period). Hopefully the market will still be there by the time they are ready. It's also not old enough yet to be rotationally harvested (clear-cut). Usually, the stuff that has been pre-commercially thinned in the past will lend itself to producing commercial size stuff at about 50 years old. About an 8-inch top and 40' foot log. If you thin this, you will typically take out smaller trees and leave the large piece.

Ralph – So it won't really pay a logger to go in and get that?

Jay – The idea is that if the new market persists, this represents an opportunity to get some of this on the shelf, and there could be an economic opportunity to do the work in the future. If you have a handful of units in a wildlife corridor, we might go ahead and thin to meet the wildlife objective (likely as a service / stewardship contract).

Mike – Young growth on POW is growing an average of 2 inches every 10 years.

Keith Rush – Maybe we could do girdling to minimize slash.

Jay – We've done a number of different types of treatments in the past... Given that this will show up in an alternative and be NEPA cleared, is there an implementation possibility that folks are more interested in? There's a general perception that stem exclusion is an issue.

Keith – During times of tight money for service contracts, it seems like if we can be more patient with those stands, they will pay more over time. If you could be patient for ten years, maybe there might be better outcomes.

Mike – Stands are carrying a lot of vegetation (forage), and after PCT, he thinks a lot will carry vegetation from now on (persistent forage).

Keith – When you look at the map, there will be several (units near?) Old Growth; it seems like foliage is not the biggest issue.

John Stevens – On some of those stands, we might want to clear cut 1-5 acres (stand diversity and/or forage production)

Mike Sheets – There's a lot of diversity in the types and ages of stands we're looking at, overall.

Consider some non-treatments stands adjacent planned OG harvest units to meet wildlife cover and security / connectivity objectives –

Bill Thomason - Commented that about 99% of this discussion is over his head; however, he understood when Ralph talked.

Jay – We'll try to minimize jargon.

Mike M. One of the functions of this group is economics. Are there more jobs in PCT or commercial thinning?

Jay – A five person thinning crew can knock out about an acre a day as a target.

Ralph – How much per acre?

Jay - Over 200 and under 250 (with question to Mike Sheets to verify)

Mike – Over the years, we've average about 300 dollars per acre (cost to government).

Jay – That's been just cut and drop – (which leaves a slash burden to wildlife in the unit).

Bill – Some of the stuff we tried in the past would probably be foolish to try again (types of equipment used – referring to his personal efforts as a contractor to implement Commercial Thinning Operations with mechanized equipment, in CT sized Young Growth).

Jay – The average cost is about 3k per acre to commercially thin Young Growth (with mechanized equipment).

Bill – There are some problems with comparability on the ground in the report. It reads more like what you would expect in OR, WA, and ID. I think we've seen that doing it the way it is done down South can't be done very economically here.

Jay – Interest is political and social, but basically they are green tomatoes, not ripe yet.

Mike – If we want more vegetation in stands, then it starts making more sense to thin when other objectives can also be met. If we don't do a commercial thin, we will probably be ahead on potential volume.

Jay – Generalist answer – earliest and most lucrative investment is in PCT because it gives the most options later. Your piece size at rotation will be small and numerous. Commercial thinning after PCT gives some intermediate benefits, but you lose volume/fiber over the long-run.

Since we are managing an entire forest, some mixture of both seems best to meet a variety of objectives, and an ability to adapt to changing conditions over time.

Mike – We are lucky here that we can grow high density tree stands without issues of fire and insects, etc... It helps long term to have trees with more taper, more wind resistance.

Ralph – No timber operator will go in there and trade PCT for timber.

Jay – Yes, PCT folks have a separate business model.

Ralph – If CT was a big enough project, then he might be interested later on (10 years); might be able to cut some old growth and take out some commercial thinning YG at the same time.

Carolyn – Is all of our PCT done by hand here?

Jay – Yes, for now.

Mike – Has wanted to experiment with mulching head on 12-mile (a project area on the Craig Ranger District).

Carolyn – If hand done, then very limited economic opportunity. If contractor is a local person and workers are hired up, then the money doesn't stay in the community; there are minimal economic benefits to the community. It seems like most local people don't want to do it.

Jim Kelly – Regarding commercial thinning – 3 months ago, Charley Streuli (Tongass Veg. Management Staff Officer) mentioned that a new export market is happening – paying approx. \$1000/1000, so if you could get it to the ship you were making money. That's a lot more lucrative than people had thought in the past.

Jay – The contractors who are working on the Big Thorne Timber Sale Analysis are recognizing that the young growth patches in the Timber Sale Analysis Area may have a good economic benefit (overseas export).

Bill – Would like to know where the \$1000 figure came from. By the time it filters down, would like to see where the money is going. It was \$300 before the \$65/mbf export premium that goes back to the Forest Service, so you're down to about \$100.

Mike – Thinks one of the factors is who is controlling the export off the island right now.

Maybe we need to talk about outside players who are controlling the export of National Forest timber.

Bill – Wants to know: Is this number real for the purposes of economic analysis. As of yesterday, the number that would find its way down to our level was \$230 (Bill has commercially thinned YG for sale, and is not getting offers of \$1000/mbf as reported).

Jay – We don't have any of this in a commercial timber sale. We aren't doing any cost collection on current stewardship projects, so don't have the data.

Bill- Is not complaining about the past, but thinks there are a lot of people on this island who will want to be involved if the economics are based on real numbers (if \$1000/mbf is real).

(Elaine Price excused herself from the meeting – to attend another)

Jim Kelly – What they are saying is that there is a different future that may be happening faster than we think.

Jay – Plans to bring maps of the alternatives to next workshop to discuss the Big Thorne Timber Sale Alternatives, and YG options being considered.

Mike Sheets – What are the tactical factors affecting export at various scales?

Ralph – Basically a small mill can't make it worthwhile profit-wise for some of these bigger exporting outfits to get involved (you can't call an exporter to come and pick-up a few loads of logs... you need a barge load or more).

Jay – We are probably not going to become export brokers... but it means that the \$1000/M is not a real number for small mill owner/operators and/or small sales opportunities - under the current conditions.

Bill – Perhaps the agency (FS) could handle export premiums differently...

Jim – CO's can set aside for disadvantaged communities.

Frank – Are there other special forest products we want to consider (such as berries, moss, etc)?

Ralph – How about more cedar trees than hemlock?

Jay – We already show preference for cedar and spruce in our PCT prescriptions.

Ralph – When the market gets soft like it is now, most smaller operators can fall back on cedar.

Jay – Have we missed any opportunities for the wildlife component? Should we save it for subsistence and access?

Jim – Gaps always come up, so it seems like they should be talked about.

Jay – Is there an interest in talking about the types of prescriptions for wildlife? Gaps does come up a lot, but it's not a panacea (fix-all).

Jim Kelly – Maybe folks don't understand the whole toolkit.

Keith -- Diversity of treatment is what seems important.

Mike – There are a range of treatments. (Gave sports car example) PCT gives a lot of bang for the buck, lot of objectives can be met with one treatment that also have long term impacts.

Recognize the Important of variety in log types for future harvest – including slow-growing, tight-grained trees from un-thinned stands (e.g. longer rotations) – which would provide a high-value product similar to what is currently being harvested

Regarding Commercial Thinning and Small Diameter log values, there were some genuine concerns expressed in the workshop about the actual value of small diameter logs to small operators, once the local export brokers have taken their cut... This is related to the perception that only a large operation, with sizeable volume under contract, can actually penetrate the export market. Otherwise, smaller operators, with small volumes under contract, have to work through intermediate operators to access that export market, and the prices they are being offered, is very far from the purported export values being discussed.

A comment also captured was that there may be more value over time, by letting these stands continue to mature. Larger piece sizes over time will make for more options at the time of harvest.

Another workshop participant also supported the inclusion of these CT units in the Big Thorne Timber Sale EIS.

Discussion of Access Opportunities: Items in bold are criteria suggested by the working group

Jay – Access and travel management (ATM) plan in 2005 effectively proposes to reduce the road system by about 600 miles and to put about 220 of those miles back as ATV trails. There is an opportunity for economical and ecological impacts by implementing plan and closing roads. When we “store” roads, there is a benefit to the landscape, and there is also an impact to having roads on the landscape. Are there priority areas to target for the work? The ATM plan represents a fairly large impact on access over time, and there are a large number of folks who are not happy with that.

ATM – There are NEPA cleared projects on the shelf right now. We could use Big Thorne timber sale analysis to supersede the decision on these roads, if necessary. How do we prioritize what has already been prepared? Has anything been missed? Once identified, what should be packaged together?

Bill Thomason - We'd be willing to try road work (as an operator who would bid on future projects)...

Jim Kelly – We might need comments from Coffman Cove and Thorne Bay communities, and then we could take another look at closed roads (or roads planned for closure in the ATM).

Dawne – What about the issue of roads that connect cities not being legal for ATV use?

Jay – None of the mainline roads were covered by the ATM. However, the agency assessed mixed-use access along the beach road and deemed that it is not safe. Up to Boy Scout is okay, so as to access the ATV trail system designated up there. Jay further went on to explain the ATM and mixed use analyses requirements. For more information, refer to the POW Access and Travel Management Plan

Bob Clause – I get a lot of people from Coffman Cove and Thorne Bay who complain about ATM, but a lot of it is enforcement stuff.

Jay – The ability to implement some of our plans has been difficult. 21 miles of roads in the project area are under contract now, and approximately 100 miles are remaining (in the Big Thorne stewardship area).

Mike – Let's quit closing roads we are going to use in the next 5-10 years.

Keith – There are roads out there that have been identified as causing resource damage; it would be good to make those a high priority.

Jay – A roads analysis process is used to determine closures and priorities – which the POW ATM relied on, heavily.

Ralph – It seems like a lot of folks are screaming about roads. Maybe it's best to discuss right after hunting season when everyone has been using the roads.

Jay – Still has national policy to implement. The question is really which roads need to be closed, and which ones are needed for subsistence access?

Bill – Is this direction for the Tongass only?

Jay – No, it's for the whole national forest system (nation wide). The current direction is to consider all roads closed unless posted open and the POW ATM tried to identify, with extensive public involvement, which roads need to be open.

Bill – Are bicycles legal on closed roads?

Jay – Yes, just not motorized vehicles. My guess is that there are roads out there that some local users have some opinions about, but they aren't here tonight.

Mike – Could you work timing of closures more with how the stands are developing? Usages for recreation and subsistence are probably lower as stands get older anyway.

Mike M – Is there a timeline for implementation of the ATM?

Jay – About 5 years; some funds we already received have been implemented and will be completed by 2013.

Mike M – You have to have the dollars to do that.

Jay – Correct, you have to have money to store the roads.

Mike – In stewardship, you can hold onto those funds and spread it out over time to use more effectively.

Jay – Correct, and we've been told that while Stewardship dollars (retained receipts) don't have a life span, fiscal groups within the agency don't want managers sitting on retained receipts forever.

Jay then shared some information contained in the 2005 OHV Rule that identified agency direction to define the "minimum road system necessary" which has not been done at a national level. Jay shared that when it is defined, it may have an impact on all National Forest ATM's.

Mike M – Are there road densities greater than current standards and guidelines in the Big Thorne area?

Jay – Some watersheds on POW and in the Big Thorne Area are at or near threshold (as established in TLMP) for water quality issues, and there is also a threshold for road density (miles of road per square mile) that engages some additional concern over wolf mortality. However, the issue for wolves appears to be translated into all roads – stored or opened – since any road still serves as an access point for human caused wolf mortality (hunting and trapping). Jay indicated that efforts are underway to refine this measurement, since not all closed (stored) roads are used by hunter and trappers to access wolves. Typically, only the first mile or so of a closed (to motorized use) road is a feasible access route for hunting/trapping.

Bob – Is it appropriate to talk about timber use LUDs with regard to where you want to keep roads open?

Jay – Yes, that's typically what we target in a criteria, along with other resource values

Ralph – If I was a timber operator in the area, I would be interested in swapping out road closures for timber.

Mike – Maybe allow short term access on temp roads for that first year or two after a sale for salvage.

Jay – This would address an emerging issue. The agency has a practice of closing out roads immediately after a timber sale closes – which is limited access to firewood and other important subsistence resources. The reason for this is rooted in the parent analyses for that timber sale and the agency's efforts to mitigate potential wolf mortality concerns. However, since all roads (open or closed) have become a point of concern, it seems more appropriate to plan for, and analyze the effect of, leaving some roads open longer to facilitate access to subsistence resources. Jay identified that the POW IDT has a game plan for this in the Big Thorne Stewardship Area and went on to further explain the challenges between Temporary Roads and Specified or System Roads... specified roads can be used for other management purposes, but temp roads are limited to just the timber sale. Interestingly, retained receipts from a Stewardship Contract could likely be retained, and later used to close specified roads that are no longer needed, after the public has had an opportunity to access subsistence resources on these roads (easily salvaged firewood, hunting fresh clear-cuts, berry harvest, etc.).

Mike – About temp roads: closure basically has to be done before the sale closes. If the contract that we're using runs over a period of time, those roads don't have to be closed until the sale closes.

Jay – Much of this discussion is directly related to subsistence management. Next meeting will address the subsistence sector.

Bob – Thinks it would be useful to have a list of potential projects (as generated by these workshops, and for which potentially interested contractors may want to consider for their capacity).

Frank – Those would be the draft alternatives for the draft EIS. Alternatives themselves may change quite a bit before the Final EIS comes out.

Bob – Wants to point out that a small constituency would prefer NO timber sales.

Jay – Here's what I can offer – We can probably take this criteria list and cross reference with specific opportunities from those the agency has already identified. We can then throw some basic cost assumptions at those projects, and give a grand total lump sum of how much it would cost to do our top-level criteria activities.

Mike M – At the first meeting we talked about bringing someone in to talk specifically about stewardship contracts.

Jay – Yes, that would be the CO (contracting officer).

NOTE: Bob's comments, among others, point to an important discussion to be had at the next workshop – wherein the workshops really need to target the local workforce/industry capable of and interested in performing Stewardship Projects from the area. What mix of projects, at what scale and over what period of time – are all topics to investigate with that local workforce. Having an agency Contracting Officer present to discuss with collaborators, the appropriate and relevant sideboards / criteria on "Best Value Contracting" would also be very important.

Bill – Would like to point out that if there is any true interest in developing the local economy, the thing you're talking about now (in our opinion) is the area of greatest disconnect in how the Forest Service operates. So this whole discussion could be meaningless. There would need to be some very specific direction to the contracting people; there is high potential for those folks not following what we're talking about.

Jay – We have a standard to use best value contracting in Stewardship Contracts

Bill – But best value can mean different things to a CO.

Jay – Yes, we may need 2-3 workshops to get down to the nitty-gritty of "best value."

Keith Rush – Will send out information from the lower 48 to help generate criteria for stewardship best value. Not all of stewardship has to be a package.

Frank – Why do you need alternatives for DEIS?

Jay – Big picture stewardship issues. The context of the next meeting is to pair projects and types of projects with potential stewardship opportunities that may be added to whatever outcomes the Big Thorne Timber Sale generates. Having people aware of the range of opportunities (alternatives) that will be considered in the Big Thorne DEIS, should help us bracket our discussions about what to plan for, especially as it relates to the local workforces capacity to operate.

Jim – We have a master mailing list for the project, we may need to tell them we are sharing these draft maps and maybe put them online.

Frank – We are probably fine with a regular notice in the paper.

Jay – Clarifies that an opportunity to look at DRAFT Alternative maps is not the an opportunity to comment under the formal comment periods that will be forthcoming on the Big Thorne Timber Sale DEIS. As Frank mentioned, the Draft maps the group will see may change before they are formally published.

Criteria / objectives captured for Access Management:

Stop Closing Roads Needed for Near-term management objectives

Focus storage / closure efforts on roads that have current resource concerns/issues

Consider aligning closures with timber stand development (timing)

Ground-truth the POW Access and Travel Management Plan, within the Big Thorne Project Area to ensure ATM implementation can occur (context for this bullet is that some of the planned OHV access routes in the ATM are proving to be physically impossible or financially impractical to create)

Resolve post-harvest access and road closure dilemma for new Timber Sale units to ensure access to subsistence resources.

Meeting adjourned:

Next Workshop:

Thorne Bay, Thursday, July 14, 2011, 5:30, PM

- Subsistence Sector Discussion
- Review of Big Thorne Timber Sale Alternatives (DRAFT Maps)
- Discussion with Interested Operators regarding what kinds of work activities should be integrated into larger projects (See Workshop Desired Outcome #3)