

Alaska Board of Forestry 2020 Annual Report to the Governor

A Review of the Alaska Forest Resources and Practices Act: Implementation and Effectiveness

February 24, 2021

The Alaska Board of Forestry

The Board of Forestry provides a forum for forest practices issues and management of forests on state land. The Board monitors the implementation and effectiveness of the Forest Resources and Practices Act and reports its findings to the Legislature and Governor. Board members represent the following constituencies:

- ◆ DNR Acting State Forester, Tim Dabney, Chair
- ◆ Native Corporations, Nathan Lojewski
- ◆ Professional Forester, Mike Post
- ◆ Recreation, Vacant
- ◆ Fish & Wildlife Biologist, Bill Morris
- ◆ Timber Industry, Eric Nichols
- ◆ Commercial Fishing, Mark Vinsel
- ◆ Mining, Denise Herzog
- ◆ Environmental Org., Chris Stark

**2020 Report from the Board of Forestry to the Governor on the Forest
Resources and Practices Act (FRPA)
February 24, 2021**

The Board of Forestry is pleased to submit our annual report to the Governor regarding the Forest Resources and Practices Act (FRPA) and forest management issues in Alaska. This letter presents our recommendations on the following topics:

1. Generating jobs and being fiscally responsible
 - Southeast Alaska timber, trade war, COVID-19 and other challenges
 - Diversifying with partnerships between recreation and forestry
 - Cost-cutting efforts & increased public participation
 - Leveraging federal funds
 - Interagency partnerships
2. Wildfire, COVID-19, and risk management
3. Forest Practices Act Effectiveness
 - Minimizing environmental impact of timber harvest
 - Funding Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) field presence

GENERATING JOBS AND BEING FISCALLY RESPONSIBLE

The Board commends the Division of Forestry (DOF) in their efforts to generate jobs for Alaskans while being fiscally responsible, despite market challenges outside their control.

Southeast Alaska timber, trade war and other challenges

As the U.S. Forest Service's timber sales in the Tongass National Forest continue to decrease, the State is under increasing pressure to offer sales to maintain a timber supply for the local industry. DOF offers all the timber allowable with a small workforce in Southeast Alaska.

Historically high log prices due to the recent COVID-19 building boom and market disruption have buoyed timber activity that was initially depressed due to tariff disruptions with China. The Board encourages the Administration and Legislature to support a prompt resolution to trade issues at the national level.

We appreciate the Administration's efforts to support Alaskan timber companies by introducing and supporting legislation to allow more flexibility in negotiated sales. These proposed statute changes will give timber companies the ability to take advantage of both export and local markets when available, while continuing to support local manufacturers of wood products. As part of the effort to encourage and sustain an export timber program, the Board would like to encourage the Administration to support a robust phytosanitary¹ program within the Division of Agriculture. This program is a key component of the process of exporting logs, and the Division of Agriculture now has only one inspector. The Board recommends that there be a contingency plan for this work to be accomplished, in the case of COVID-19-related illness or travel restrictions.

¹ The phytosanitary program ensures that logs being shipped to foreign markets meet plant health requirements of importing countries. Not all countries require a phytosanitary certificate for logs, but China and potentially Japan in the near future do.

Diversifying with partnerships between recreation and forestry

The Board commends DOF for launching a pilot program for a partnership between forestry and recreation groups and agencies. In the Tanana Valley State Forest's Rosie Creek area, DOF is using Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) funds (administered by the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation through their Recreational Trails Program) to regrade an 18-mile system of forestry roads, post the roads with directional signs and maps, and provide parking for the public by grading and clearing an inactive material site of junk cars.

This forestry/recreation initiative is intended to diversify and increase the types of activities on State Forest lands, taking advantage of the fact that recreation activities can benefit from appropriate use of timber management roads, and timber management can benefit from access to funding associated with recreation. An additional benefit is the chance to demonstrate to the public the positive impacts of responsible forest management, while supporting Alaska's timber program.

Cost-cutting efforts and greater public participation

In an effort to cut our own costs to the state budget, the Board of Forestry changed our practices from attending three in-person meetings a year to conducting two meetings by teleconference, and holding just one in-person meeting a year that incorporates a field visit to important sites in one of the three FRPA regions. This year, due to COVID concerns, all our meetings were held via WebEx, and Board members participated from individual offices or homes. An advantage of this method was that DOF could widely advertise the WebEx login, and members of the public could more easily call in and participate in the meeting. More than 40 people attended the December meeting, including public, non-profit, and agency staff members.

This is just one way the Division of Forestry is working actively to reduce costs while increasing opportunities for forestry in Alaska. We recommend that the Division's budget not be reduced further on either its forest resources side or its fire prevention and suppression side.

Leveraging federal funds

The Board is pleased with the efforts of DOF, the Administration, and Legislature to take advantage of federal funds when possible, by using State funds as match for grants for work on fuel breaks, building forestry roads, providing recreation opportunities, and increasing positive exposure to the public about forestry.

Every ten years, a full revision of the Alaska Forest Action Plan is required by the Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act for continued federal funding of cooperative forestry and cooperative fire programs. DOF completed its Alaska Forest Action Plan in December 2020, which provides a statewide, all lands assessment of forest conditions and trends, identifies threats to forest resources, sets forward a strategy to address those threats, and delineates the priority landscape on which to focus that strategy. The 2020 Forest Action Plan is a way for DOF, in cooperation with stakeholders, to prioritize where and how to apply strategies that will make the most of the funding available to address forest issues.

Spending our funds wisely by leveraging state funds to receive many more federal dollars will continue to improve our ability to provide timber to support Alaskan timber companies, to protect our communities from wildfire, and by supporting recreational investments, give visitors more reasons to spend time and money in Alaska.

Interagency Partnerships

Roadless Rule

In October 2020, The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced a final Alaska Roadless Rule that exempts the Tongass National Forest from the 2001 provision that prohibited road construction, road reconstruction and timber harvests. The Record of Decision identifies the selected alternative, Alternative 6, which is a full exemption from the Roadless Rule; provides the rationale for the decision; and explains that the exemption does not authorize any specific projects in Alaska. Proposed projects must continue to comply with the 2016 Tongass Land Management Plan and be analyzed under the National Environmental Policy Act.

In the months before the decision, Terra Verde, Inc. completed a GIS-based analysis of the six alternatives in the USFS Environmental Impact Statement. The analysis determined that, regardless of alternative chosen, the 2016 Tongass National Forest Plan will defer 80% of the suitable old growth forest land base from timber harvest over the next 20 years because of factors like non-development land use designations, retention buffers on streams and karst, and topography.

Terra Verde also found that an additional seven percent of the suitable land base will be deferred due to selective harvesting prescriptions in the plan. Additional reductions are likely on a project-by-project basis. The initial 80% deferred by the 2016 Forest Plan plus the seven percent identified in the analysis means that at least 87 out of every 100 acres of suitable old growth forest will be unavailable to maintain the existing timber industry during its transition to young growth.

Tongass Young Growth Inventory

The transition to young growth timber is extremely important to the industry, as the remaining available old growth timber dwindles. DOF partnered with the US Forest Service and the private sector to produce an inventory of young-growth timber in the Tongass National Forest. The inventory will help continue the long-term shift from old-growth to young-growth harvest. The Young-Growth Inventory includes information for every young-growth timber stand in the national forest, plus management tools including estimates of when each stand may be economically logged. New forest planning tools will improve Tongass managers' ability to develop and plan future young-growth forest restoration projects, pre-commercial tree-thinning projects, and timber sales to meet forest management objectives. The report's maps and data document the location and extent of each young-growth stand in the Tongass, and provide abundant information on its condition, accessibility, suitability for harvest, and other data that can guide long-term logging and management planning and decisions.

The Board congratulates the DOF on its collaborative work with the U.S. Forest Service to improve existing young growth information and increase economic opportunities for local communities in both the short- and long-term. Work currently focuses on a coordinated, collaborative plan to train agency field crews and to strategically locate economical sales.

WILDFIRE, COVID-19, AND RISK MANAGEMENT

Hazard fuel reduction

Evidence shows that wildfire risks are steadily increasing in Alaska, with the wildfire season starting earlier and lasting later than in the past. It is more important than ever to make sure that our communities are prepared for wildfire. In 2020, for the first time, the Alaska Legislature appropriated funds for hazard fuel reduction efforts. \$5 million was set aside for a multi-year

capital budget to help create a more comprehensive and robust hazard fuel reduction program, including maintaining and creating fuel breaks, using the concept of firesheds, and working with communities and local government to ensure that **every** community in the boreal forest has an updated community wildfire protection plan (CWPP) and community response plan.

DOF is currently working on a plan to annually fund the \$5 million level of commitment. In the past, the fuels program was totally dependent on federal funds, but the DOF will now have more flexibility with both sources of funding, and the maintenance of fuel breaks can now be accomplished with state dollars.

Proposed legislation to fund hazard fuels work

Currently, state-employed emergency firefighter (EFF) crews may only be used in emergencies, which means that they may not be hired to work on fuel treatment projects. The Board supports the Division of Forestry in its work with the Administration and Legislature to try to remove this restriction, so state-employed EFF crews can be paid to work on vital fuel reduction projects during low fire years and in the off-season. This will both help reduce wildfire risks, and by extending work opportunities, help these crews remain intact and ready when needed.

Wildland fire prevention

DOF has also addressed the human behaviors that affect wildland fire. In 2019, DOF revamped state regulations concerning fire prevention, and now has a range of new tools to educate the public and enforce the state's burn statutes. Prevention officers rolled out the new "Take Time to Learn Before You Burn" program to educate the public about fire risks. The goal of the program is a 10% reduction in human-caused wildland fire ignitions annually for the next three years. During the 2020 fire season, the program was successful, and achieved the second year in a row of a 10%+ decrease in human caused wildfires.

COVID-19 Response

The Board commends the Division of Forestry on its extraordinary efforts on responding to the COVID-19 crisis. The DOF's products have been used by a variety of other agencies in their responses.

In March, DOF formed a COVID-19 Response Team to provide for the safety of its employees, wildland firefighters, and the public. The team created COVID-19 directives and health and safety recommendations for the DOF based on scientific information from the U.S. Center for Disease Control. Implementation of guidelines continued as wildland fire activity increased in late-May through mid-June and as regular forest resources fieldwork began. Constant communication between the COVID team and employees in the early months of the COVID outbreak led to effective policies, made available on the DOF's COVID-response webpage: <http://forestry.alaska.gov/covid>.

During August, as Alaska's fire season ended, the Response Team focused on supporting crews and staff on assignments in the Lower 48 (L48) as the fire season there escalated. As the division experienced some COVID-19 exposures, the Response Team helped develop protocols to keep employees safe while serving the public.

The DOF continues to implement these plans to help ensure staff safety at the office, in the field for resources work, and on wildland fires, using new communications technology to share information and maintain connections between staff members. With the ever-changing landscape

that the COVID-19 pandemic brings, DOF modifies guidelines as new information is received from the Alaska Department of Health & Social Services and the Governor's Office.

FOREST PRACTICES ACT EFFECTIVENESS

Minimizing environmental impact of timber harvest

The Alaska Forest Resources and Practices Act (FRPA, AS 41.17) governs how commercial timber harvesting, reforestation, and timber access occur on state, private, and municipal land. The Act is designed to protect fish habitat and water quality and ensure prompt reforestation while providing for an economically viable timber industry.

The FRPA balances economic concerns for the timber industry with water quality and habitat protection needs. The FRPA framework provides certainty and credibility for landowners, operators, and the public, and establishes one-stop shopping for compliance with state and federal clean water standards. The FRPA does not issue a permit for activities but relies on commercial forest operator's submittal of a notice of activities via the detailed plan of operations (DPO). DNR is the lead agency and coordinates activities with ADF&G and DEC, and the agencies must act upon the DPO within 30 days. The FRPA depends on a suite of best management practices (BMPs), field inspections by state agency staff and proactive educational efforts to achieve compliance. When required, appropriate enforcement tools are provided by the Act to ensure resources are protected. The net effect of these steps creates an efficient, practical approach to helping timber and fishing industries continue to provide long-term jobs in support of communities throughout the state.

The Forest Resources & Practices Act, when properly implemented, helps the timber and fishing industries to operate profitably and efficiently while protecting fish habitat and water quality. Continued effectiveness depends on sufficient funding for the resource agencies to carry out their respective duties.

Funding DEC field presence

Because of reductions in funding allocations to the Department of Environmental Conservation's Division of Water (DOW), DOW staff have not been able to participate in field monitoring in recent years. Alaska now lacks the field presence of one of the three key agencies responsible for ensuring compliance with and effectiveness of the Forest Practices Act. The Board of Forestry strongly recommends providing funding to support part of a water quality position to DOW, to allow DEC to once again participate in FRPA field monitoring. The collaboration among *all three* agencies helps ensure the successful continuation of the Alaska timber and fishing industries. This recommendation helps support a stronger Alaska economy. As mentioned above, the continuation of sustainable timber management practices adds value to Alaska timber, and helps to sustain stream quality that supports our commercial and sport fish industries.

FRPA Effectiveness

The Board reviewed the 2020 reports from the departments of Fish and Game, Environmental Conservation, and Natural Resources, and the 2020 compliance monitoring results (see attached reports). Compliance monitoring showed that operators statewide have high rates of compliance and are implementing the FRPA BMPs properly. Compliance monitoring scores are at the same level as last year in Region I and increased in Region III. RII was not computed as only one inspection occurred, due to low harvest levels.

All three agencies reported that FRPA was effective in 2020 in all three FRPA Regions (Region I: Southeast/coastal Alaska; Region II: Mat-Su/Southwest; Region III: Northern/Copper River). Region I compliance was high as 90% of all BMPs evaluated met or exceeded compliance standards, although there were individual BMPs which required corrective action. Those BMPs were related to road drainage, adequate number of drainage structures and curb installations on log bridges. Operators acted quickly to rectify deficiencies as they were discovered. Active road maintenance and BMPs related to timber harvest were excellent. One training session was held in Southeast for ADFG and DEC. Due to low harvest activity, only one inspection was conducted in Region II, so compliance results were not summarized. Region III had excellent compliance results in 2020 at 97%, which is an increase over last year. Although 2020 was a wet year with challenging road conditions, nearly the entire TVSF road system received grading before freeze-up, so the roads are in excellent shape currently. Compliance was exceptional on most harvest operations in Region III.

If a problem arises, DNR provides focused training to operators and makes sure that the issues are addressed. Enforcement authorities are part of the toolbox for ensuring that FRPA is implemented effectively, but this year DNR did not need to issue any enforcement actions.

Conclusion

The Board endorses the Alaska Forest Resources and Practices Act and its regulations as a practical and effective approach to protecting fish habitat and water quality, ensuring reforestation, and helping to support our State economy by maintaining sustainable timber and fishing industries. We remain committed to the principles of fairness, equitable distribution of costs, enforceability, and professional management upon which FRPA is based.

Sincerely,

Timothy A. Dabney, Acting State Forester
Chair, Alaska Board of Forestry

Alaska Board of Forestry

Nathan Lojewski, Alaska Native Corporations
Denise Herzog, Mining Organization
Bill Morris, Non-governmental Professional Fish/Wildlife Biologist
Eric Nichols, Forest Industry Trade Association
Mike Post, Non-governmental Professional Forester
Chris Stark, Environmental Organization
Mark Vinsel, Commercial Fisherman's Organization
Vacant, Recreation Organization

Attachments

- 2020 ADFG Report to the Board of Forestry
- 2020 DEC Report to the Board of Forestry
- 2020 DNR Report to the Board of Forestry