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Study: Need for Tongass logs in flux

Dramatic changes expected in future demand for timber

The Forest Service unveiled a new Tongass timber study Tuesday that shows a more extreme range of options for the future of Southeast Alaska's logging industry.

The Forest Service is under a court order to fix the Tongass National Forest's timber demand projections, which it mistakenly doubled in the forest's 1997 management plan.

The new timber study is a critical factor in the Forest Service's fix of the plan, providing options for future logging levels for the national forest. The report is titled "Timber Products Output and Timber Harvest in Alaska, Projects for 2005-2025."

The study indicates that the most realistic scenario for the next 20 years is a timber harvest remaining at the historic low level that exists today.

But the study also suggests a much more optimistic scenario, from a timber-production standpoint. The report's three authors, all Forest Service scientists, say the global demand for the region's wood could be seven times greater if two new low-grade wood fiber factories - producing fiber board or veneer - sprouted up in Southeast Alaska.

"You wouldn't be able to supply all of the material for that scenario from the Tongass," explained co-author Allen Brackley, a research forester at the Alaska Wood Utilization Research and Development center in Sitka. Native corporations and the state of Alaska also would need to chip in low-grade wood to the new plants, Brackley said.

Investors would need the Forest Service to guarantee a high volume of low-grade wood before they'd put their money behind new manufacturing plants, said George Woodbury, a board member of the Alaska Forest Association, a Ketchikan-based timber industry group.

"The status quo just won't work," Woodbury said.

Juneau environmentalists said Tuesday that the study's low-end estimate for the future timber demand on the Tongass - about 38 million board feet per year - seems much more

reasonable.

"The high-volume scenarios just look completely unrealistic," said Buck Lindekugel, conservation director for the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council. The region's defunct pulp mills in Ketchikan and Sitka had "sweetheart deals and long-term (timber) contracts," but still the plants could not compete in the global market, Lindekugel said.

The study details four scenarios for timber demand in the Tongass, ranging from 38 million board feet to 360 million board feet per year. The middle scenarios assume an expansion of production by the Panhandle's mom-and-pop mills and its three mid-sized lumber mills.

The first three scenarios are all "considerably lower" than those in a similar Forest Service timber study published in 1997, Brackley said Tuesday.

The Forest Service is under a 9th Circuit Court of Appeals court order to fix its current timber demand projections because it misapplied the findings of the 1997 study in its Tongass Land Management Plan, published the same year.

The previous timber study had reported 68 to 154 million board feet per year as the market demand for Tongass timber. Tongass officials inflated that figure to 130 to 296 million board feet per year under the incorrect assumption that the report's authors had only analyzed demand for Tongass saw logs and did not include the market's demand for utility lumber.

Brackley said Tuesday that it is terribly difficult to predict future demand for timber. He noted a "complete turnaround" in Tongass timber demand since 1997. For example, very little Tongass lumber is now going to Japan, and instead is going to the Lower 48 or remaining in Alaska, he said.

The new study points out that the Forest Service's current methods of assessing timber demand in the Tongass are already becoming obsolete because of new regional trends, such as local mills competing with retail lumber suppliers. Also, the current model doesn't incorporate transportation costs, which are becoming a big impediment to timber industry profits, according to the study.

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