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TLMP cyber open house well received

KETCHIKAN (KDN) — The U.S. Forest Service Tongass Web site's traffic increased about 93 percent Thursday during the Internet open house about the Tongass Land and Resource Management Plan.

Sixteen people asked questions and five people presented testimony, said Dennis Neill, Tongass National Forest Service spokesman. More than 40,000 hits were on the site during the cyber open house Thursday, which is more than the usual daily traffic of 2,000 to 3,000 hits a day, he said.

He said having 40,000 hits that day gave him the sense that people were interested in the open house and the new way of holding it.

People from all over the Lower 48, ranging from Maryland to Washington asked questions. People from Ketchikan and other parts of Alaska also asked questions.

"It's the kind of thing that is natural for a remote natural forest, the Tongass," Neill said. "People can't typically come here from Florida, Maryland or Arizona to a public meeting, but set the meeting (online), people can log on and directly ask questions of Forest Service staff."

Five people answered questions in a conference room in Bothell, Wash., where Tetra Tech, the software consultant, is located. The five were Neill; Lee Kramer, project manager for forest plan amendment; Larry Lunde, forest planning staff officer; and Tetra Tech staff Randy Fairbanks and Matt Dadswell.

The questions and answers can be viewed at the Tongass National Forest site <http://www.tongass-fpadjust.net/townhall/oh/openHouse.php>.

"We had people ask very intelligent, substantive questions," Neill said.

Questions that were asked ranged from how the plan would help Southeast Alaska communities support an economical timber industry to how the alternatives affect tourism in Southeast Alaska to protecting roadless areas in the Tongass National Forest.

Neill said this type of meeting gives people whose schedules don't accommodate public meetings or people who are not comfortable making public comment at a public meeting a different way of getting questions answered.

"The fact that people participated tells me they thought it was useful," he said.

There are no plans to hold another Internet open house in the near future, Neill said.

"We wouldn't do it on timber sale EIS or on environmental assessment for recreation cabins, but if it's a major forest-wide issue, I can see doing this; it's valuable," he said.

Public comment can be submitted on TLMP until April 30.