

plan includes an old growth habitat conservation strategy, outlined in the response to comments on environmental effects of the proposed rule that is one of the best in the world. The strategy provides habitat to maintain well-distributed, viable populations of old-growth-associated species across the Forest. The strategy also considers development on adjacent State and private lands. Many existing roadless areas were also incorporated into reserves using non-development land use designations. The strategy was scientifically developed and was subjected to independent scientific peer review.

The science consistency review process used in developing the 1997 Tongass Forest Plan is seen as a model for science-based management that has been emulated in other Forest Service planning efforts. Planning is not a process of science, but rather is a process that uses scientific information to assist officials in making decisions. Under the scientific consistency process, the role of science in planning is explicitly defined as requiring that all relevant scientific information available must be considered; scientific information must be understood and correctly interpreted, including the uncertainty regarding that information; and the resource risks associated with the decision must be acknowledged and documented. The 1997 Tongass Forest Plan meets these criteria, as documented in "Evaluation of the Use of Scientific Information in Developing the 1997 Forest Plan for the Tongass," published by the Department's Pacific Northwest Research Station in 1997. Exempting the Tongass from the prohibitions of the roadless rule returns management of the Tongass to the direction contained in a forest plan that has undergone thorough scientific review, which found the Tongass Forest Plan to be consistent with the available science.

*Compliance with Executive Order 13175 and Finding of No "Tribal Implications."* An Alaska Native community disagreed with the agency's finding that the proposed rule does not have "Tribal implications" under Executive Order 13175. The community's comment included concerns about "catastrophic economic and social losses due to the shutdown of the Tongass," and noted that more than 200 timber-related jobs have been lost in that community since the roadless rule was implemented. The comment also outlined Federal law and policy that mandates consideration of Tribal economic well-being.

*Response.* The agency did not conclude that the roadless policy has "no impact" on Tribes, because clearly the loss of jobs and economic opportunity has greatly affected some of them. The stated severe effect on the social and economic fabric of life in Southeast Alaska from the decline in the timber industry is one of the reasons the Department is adopting an exemption to the roadless rule for the Tongass. Exempting the Tongass from the prohibitions in the roadless rule will mean that more options will be available to alleviate some of these impacts. A primary focus of the exemption is to reduce the social and economic impacts to Tribes.

The agency did conclude that the proposed rule to exempt the Tongass from the roadless rule would not impinge on Tribal sovereignty, would not require Tribal expenditures of funds, and would not change the distribution of power between the Federal government and Indian or Alaska Native Tribes. It is under this narrow sense of Executive Order 13175 that the finding of no Tribal implications was made for the proposed rule. For this final rule, the Department has determined that there could be substantial future direct effects to one or more Tribes, and that these effects are anticipated to be positive. A discussion regarding consultation and coordination with Indian Tribal Governments about this final rule in accordance with Executive Order 13175 can be found in the Regulatory Certification section of this preamble.

*Volume of Public Comment and Support for the Roadless Rule.* Many comments discussed the volume of public comment received over the past 5 years in support of the roadless rule and its application to the Tongass. Some people said that the roadless rule is a landmark conservation policy that has been supported by 2.2 million people, and, therefore the proposed rule ignored the wishes of the vast majority of roadless rule comments supporting protection of roadless areas in all national forests, including Alaska's. Other people noted that nearly all elected officials in Alaska opposed the roadless rule and supported the exemption.

*Response.* Every comment received is considered for its substance and contribution to informed decisionmaking whether it is one comment repeated by tens of thousands of people or a comment submitted by only one person. The public comment process is not a scientifically valid survey process to determine public opinion. The emphasis in the comment

review process is on the content of the comment rather than on the number of times a comment was received. The comment analysis is intended to identify each unique substantive comment relative to the proposed rule to facilitate its consideration in the decisionmaking process. In matters of controversial national policy, it is impossible to please everyone. When those commenting do not see their view reflected in the final decision, they should not conclude that their comments were ignored. All comments are considered, including comments that support and that oppose the proposal. That people do not agree on how public lands should be managed is a historical, as well as modern dilemma faced by resource managers. However, public comment processes, while imperfect, do provide a vital avenue for engaging a wide array of the public in resource management processes and outcomes.

*Adequacy of Timber Volume along Existing Roads.* The agency received comments regarding the effect of the roadless rule's prohibitions on supplies to forest product industries in Southeast Alaska. Some respondents stated the exemption of the Tongass from the roadless rule was not necessary because the roadless rule FEIS projected 50 million board feet could be harvested annually in the developed areas along the existing road system on the Tongass. Some commented they believed there was an adequate amount of national forest timber currently under contract to keep the forest products industry supplied for a number of years. Other respondents stated the exemption was necessary if forest product industries in Southeast Alaska were to have enough timber volume to maintain their operations.

*Response.* Only 4 percent of the Tongass is available for commercial timber harvest under the forest plan. About half of this is in inventoried roadless areas. Further reductions in areas available for timber harvest to an already very limited timber supply would have unacceptable social, aesthetic, and environmental impacts. As was disclosed in the roadless rule FEIS, a sustained annual harvest level of 50 million board feet would not support all of the timber processing facilities in the region.

The Tongass Timber Reform Act directs the Secretary of Agriculture to seek to provide a supply of timber from the Tongass, which (1) meets the annual market demand for timber from the forest and (2) meets the market demand from the forest for each planning cycle, consistent with providing for the