

multiple use and sustained yield of all renewable forest resources, and subject to appropriations, other applicable law, and the requirements of the National Forest Management Act.

Benchmark harvest levels displayed in the roadless rule FEIS for the Tongass Exempt Alternative were based on a long-term market demand estimate of 124 million board feet (MMBF) per year. The procedure used to derive this figure is documented in a 1997 report by Forest Service economists, which predicted Tongass National Forest timber demand through 2010, relying upon such factors as current processing capacity in the region and the market share of Southeast Alaskan products in their principal markets (Timber Products Output and Timber Harvests in Alaska: Projections for 1997 to 2010. Brooks and Haynes, 1997. Pacific Northwest Research Station). Copies of this report may be obtained at 333 Southwest First Avenue, P.O. Box 3890, Portland, OR 97208-3890. Three different market scenarios (low, medium, and high) were considered, and the 124 MMBF figure represents the average value of the low market scenario estimates for the years 2001 through 2010. Comparable estimates for the medium and high scenarios are 151 and 184 MMBF per year, respectively.

Though the 1999 harvest level, at 146 MMBF, more closely approximates the medium market demand scenario, the roadless rule FEIS chose the low market for its benchmark analysis, and recent developments support this decision. If anything, the low market scenario appears optimistic in light of the 48 MMBF of Tongass National Forest timber harvested in 2001, the 34 MMBF harvested in 2002, and the 51 MMBF harvested in 2003 (fiscal years). At the end of fiscal year 2003, the amount of timber under contract on the Tongass was 193 MMBF, although the agency seeks to provide a sustained flow of timber sale offerings sufficient to maintain a volume under contract equal to 3 years of estimated timber demand. Recently, Congress enacted P.L. 108-108, Department of Interior and Related Agencies Appropriation Act for fiscal year 2004. Section 339 of this Act authorizes cancellation of certain timber sale contracts on the Tongass National Forest and provides that the timber included in such cancelled contracts shall be available for resale by the Secretary of Agriculture. Complete descriptions of the timber scheduling and pipeline process are found in Appendix A of all timber sale project environmental impact statements for the Tongass.

The last three years represent a significant aberration from historical harvest levels. The 1980-2002 average harvest was 269 MMBF, and in no year prior to 2001 did the harvest level fall below 100 MMBF. As recently as 1995, the Tongass National Forest harvests were in excess of 200 MMBF, and the average harvest over the 1995-2002 time period was approximately 120 MMBF. In light of this historical performance, the 124 MMBF low market estimate is not an unreasonable expectation for the coming decade, particularly if the current slump is merely a cyclical downturn. Of course market conditions may continue to deteriorate, and current low or even lower levels of harvest may become the norm. But in this case both the "negative" impacts of roading in roadless areas as well as the "positive" impacts related to employment would be reduced.

The Department believes that the roadless rule prohibitions operate as an unnecessary and complicating factor limiting where timber harvesting may occur. Accomplishment of social, economic, and biological goals can best be met through the management direction established through the Tongass Forest Plan.

*Need for a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement.* Some respondents said a supplemental environmental impact statement (SEIS) is necessary before a decision can be made to exempt the Tongass from the prohibitions in the roadless rule. They suggested that new information or changed circumstances have occurred that have changed the effects disclosed in the roadless rule FEIS, so a supplement is required. The changes most often cited included the set aside of the 1999 record of decision (ROD) for the Tongass Forest Plan and the changes in timber harvest levels and related employment in Southeast Alaska. Others also mentioned the updated roadless area inventory that was completed for the 2003 record of decision on wilderness recommendations and the pending land exchange with Sealaska, an Alaska Native Corporation.

*Response.* The determination of whether a supplemental EIS is required involves a two-step process. First new information must be identified and, second, an analysis of whether the new information is significant to the proposed action must be completed. The Forest Service has prepared a supplemental information report that describes this process, the analysis completed, and the conclusions reached. This report is available on the World Wide Web/Internet on the Forest

Service Roadless Area Conservation Web site at <http://www.roadless.fs.fed.us>.

The conclusion in the supplemental information report is that the identified new information and changed circumstances do not result in significantly different environmental effects from those described in the roadless rule FEIS. Such differences as may exist are not of a scale or intensity to be relevant to the adoption of this final rule or to support selection of another alternative from the roadless rule FEIS. Consequently, the overall decisionmaking picture is not substantially different from what it was in November 2000, when the roadless rule FEIS was completed. The effects of adopting the proposed rule as final have been displayed to the public and thoroughly considered. For all these reasons, no additional environmental analysis is required.

*Economic Effects of the Roadless Rule.* The agency received many comments regarding the economic effects that the roadless rule has had or would have in Southeast Alaska. People who commented were concerned about the ability of Southeast Alaska to develop a sustainable economy if the Tongass is not exempted from the roadless rule prohibitions. Concerns expressed included the limitation of the development of infrastructure, such as roads and utilities that are taken for granted elsewhere in the United States, the loss of jobs, and the loss of opportunity for Southeast Alaska to grow and develop responsibly. Other people said that any economic benefits from exempting the Tongass from the prohibitions in roadless rule are far smaller than estimated, while the adverse effects to the environment will be far greater.

*Response.* In the January 2001 record of decision on the roadless rule, the Secretary of Agriculture acknowledged the adverse economic effects to some forest-dependent communities from the prohibitions in the roadless rule. The decision was made to apply the roadless rule to the Tongass even though it was recognized there would be adverse effects to some communities. Due to serious concerns about these previously disclosed economic and social hardships the roadless rule would cause in communities throughout Southeast Alaska, the Department moved forward to reexamine the rule.

The Department has concluded that the social and economic hardships to Southeast Alaska outweigh the potential long-term ecological benefits because the Tongass Forest Plan adequately provides for the ecological sustainability