

A photograph of a wooden staircase in a forest, heavily covered in moss and ferns. The stairs lead up a hillside, flanked by tall, dark tree trunks. The scene is lush and green, with sunlight filtering through the canopy. The text is overlaid in white, bold font.

# Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy Forest-wide Chapter.

Prepared by: Alaska Trails

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## CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

### GROWING DEMAND FOR TRAILS, LAGGING SUPPLY

- The Alaska tourism industry is evolving, with growing interest in the active, intimate experience of the outdoor world that trails provide. The fastest growing area of participation for out of state travelers to Alaska, both independent and cruise visitors, was hiking and nature walks<sup>1</sup>.
- The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically impacted Alaska's visitor industry, particularly in cruise ship-dominated Southeast. But travel to Alaska has come back strong, driven by a surge in independent travelers beginning in 2020, and returning cruise ships in 2022. Over these same years Alaska residents were using trails and participating in outdoor recreation in record numbers, a pattern that has persisted, even as COVID has declined.
- A recurring theme heard during the Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy process was that in much of the Tongass, the supply of trails and related outdoor recreation infrastructure falls well short of existing and anticipated demand, by both visitors and residents.

### OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

- The extensive trail system in the Tongass National Forest's spectacular natural world was built during an era with more trail funds and fewer construction constraints. While much loved, the Tongass trail system is aging and deteriorating in many locations. In the 100 plus years since the Tongass National Forest was established, recreation staff and funding for trails have remained a much lower priority than logging. Trails are simply not built in the same way they were during this period of construction.
- Over this same timeframe the United States Forest Service (USFS) has become more rule-bound and process oriented. Steps to design, approve and build a trail that used to happen in one or two seasons now routinely take five years or longer. Notwithstanding the recent burst of federal funding, staff and construction funding for trail work have been very limited.
- As currently structured, the USFS can't support the existing trail system in Tongass, much less meet growing future demand. As stated by many people involved in this process, "the current system is broken"<sup>2</sup>. New approaches are required to create a sustainable trail system.

### WHY IT MATTERS

- Trails have a proven power to deliver a host of benefits, including attracting visitors and visitor spending, encouraging healthy outdoor activity, supporting community quality of life, providing access to subsistence resources, and encouraging stewardship. Studies show well-developed systems of trails and attractive natural areas are powerful tools for attracting and retaining businesses and residents.
- The need for the many benefits trails bring – particularly economic benefits – could not be greater in Southeast Alaska as a whole. A University of Alaska Anchorage report, released in late 2022, states: "Taken together, Alaska's economic performance between 2015 and 2021 — in employment growth, unemployment, net out migration, and gross domestic product — place Alaska's economic health at the bottom of all 50 states and the District of Columbia."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.alaskatourism.org/marketing/alaska-visitors-statistics-program-avsp-vii>

<sup>2</sup> The TSTS process included frank conversations with District Rangers and other Forest staff. Where these conversations produced valuable, insightful quotes, these are presented without attribution to a specific individual to protect their anonymity.

<sup>3</sup> Alaska's Economic Performance in National Context, UAA Center for Economic Development, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59f6b60bcf81e02892fd0261/t/63755223ed155a341638d13b/1668633124243/ak-econ-performance.pdf>

- If out-of-state visitors had reasons to spend one more day in Alaska, the result would add \$250 million in annual spending in the State. The average stay in Alaska is 9 days; in New Zealand, with its more generous system of trails and other outdoor recreation infrastructure, the average stay is 19 days.

## RECOMMENDATIONS SUMMARY – SEVEN OVERARCHING STRATEGIES

The USFS Ten-Year Trail Challenge<sup>4</sup> and the National Strategy for a Sustainable Trail System<sup>5</sup> include the broad directives below, providing the foundation for the strategies in this chapter:

**USFS Ten-Year Trail Challenge:** “The Trail Challenge focuses the collective efforts of employees, partners, and volunteers during the next decade to develop efficiencies, increase capacity, remove roadblocks, and lead to more sustainable National Forest system trails.”

**National Strategy for a Sustainable Trail System:** “A generation ago, nearly every ranger district had its own trail crew, but that is no longer the case. The USFS will overcome a significant reduction in field staff by moving from a model of “doing it all” to a model of shared stewardship to achieve mutual goals and receive shared benefits.”

Sustainability strategies presented in this chapter are summarized below. By design, and in the spirit of the quotes above, this material presents views from perspectives *both within and outside* the USFS and does not necessarily represent the formal position of Tongass National Forest on these topics.

1. **Think differently about partnerships – “Ask not what partners can do for the Forest, ask what the Forest can do to build partnerships!”** Trail organizations in Juneau and Sitka show the benefits nonprofit partners can provide for trails, securing funding and adding value well beyond what the Forest can do on its own. Comparable partners are needed in the rest of the Forest, but that will not happen without upfront investments of time and funding by the USFS. To connect with potent new Forest-wide partners – notably the Sustainable Southeast Partnership – the USFS investment needed is not just monetary, but relational. In smaller communities without existing trail organizations, the Forest needs to help build and nurture new local partners.
2. **Simplify and streamline USFS internal processes – “How do we simplify? Doing anything inside the USFS is difficult”** Funding limitations are only one part of the challenges for trails. The complex web of USFS internal processes create a strangling set of bottlenecks for planning, approving, building, and maintaining trails. All the steps in these internal processes need to be scrutinized for efficiency, efficacy and need. The Tongass should aim to become a nationwide leader in simplifying and/or outsourcing trail processes to qualified partners.
3. **Explore new funding sources, linked to usage** – New strategies are needed that link current and growing trail use and the related spending on lodging, food, gear, and guides, with the growing funding needed to improve and sustain the trail system. Funding from the City and Borough of Juneau to Trail Mix is a good example.
4. **Develop the next generation of the USFS’ workforce** - The USFS needs an explicit plan to accelerate the training of a new generation of trail planners and trail builders, including both recently hired USFS Landscape Architects, and private sector contractors. Supporting USFS partners who offer professional trail building courses and training will also be critical. The lack of such personnel may be the biggest near-term barrier for improving the Tongass trail system.
5. **Expand the definition of, and prioritize, sustainability** – The National Trails Plan defines sustainability as trails that are socially valued, economically viable, and support ecological

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/trails/10YTC>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/trails/national-strategy>

resilience. In the Tongass these criteria need to embrace two important ideas: “Socially valued” needs to include the desire by residents Forest-wide for more and better trails, and the role of trails in sustaining and celebrating the region’s rich cultural heritage. “Economically viable,” needs to go beyond a focus on funding to maintain trails. Building on other national USFS directives, this topic needs to include using trails as an economic development tool. Expanded economic health is a worthy goal on its own but is essential to growing the resources partners need for a more sustainable Tongass trail system.

6. **Refine system-wide criteria for trails Investments** – The Tongass needs new and improved trails. But even with expanded funding and new partnerships the resources for trail projects will always fall short. New reference points are needed to guide decisions on how best to spend finite trail dollars. The *Recommended Forest-Wide General Approaches* section of this chapter presents twelve recommended approaches, including a focus on community-driven priorities and partner support, decommissioning some existing lower value trails and/or trails not environmentally sustainable, and a focus on improving or building new trails in portions of the Forest where trail systems are underdeveloped.
7. **Transform the “culture” Tongass Forest Staff and Leadership** – Stated broadly, the goal of the 10-Year Challenge and National Forest Strategy is a call for a change in USFS “culture”. An initial response to the recommendations in the national strategies and this chapter may be, “well, those changes are sensible and desirable, but not possible within the constraints of the federal rules, personalities, traditions, etc.” The heart of what this Forest-wide paper recommends is this: it will not be possible to create a sustainable Tongass trail system within current USFS rules/processes/cultural norms. *Cultural change is critical* – the Tongass National Forest needs to evolve from the current cumbersome, slow moving approach on trails, to a partnership-building, lean and mean, trail building machine.

## **INTRODUCTION**

At the direction of the USFS, Alaska Trails has taken a community-driven approach to develop the Tongass National Forest Sustainable Trails Strategy. This work was prepared under a Challenge Cost Share Agreement between the USFS and Alaska Trails. This chapter identifies issues, opportunities and challenges for developing a sustainable trails system on a Forest-wide level, while also making recommendations for general approaches that could improve the overall sustainability of the trail system. For a more in depth introduction to the entire project, consult the overall Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy Introduction. To learn more about specific issues not necessarily applicable across the entire Tongass and for recommendations specific to individual Ranger Districts, consult the independent Ranger District chapters

The goal of every planner, including those who prepared this strategy, is that their work will create tangible results. For this strategy to improve the sustainability of the Tongass National Forest's trail system, these recommendations will need to be considered and, where deemed appropriate, implemented.

The staff at Alaska Trails, who prepared this draft Strategy, are immensely grateful to the entities who have generously offered their wisdom, insight and feedback as this chapter was developed, including USFS staff, the cities and boroughs of Southeast Alaska, community organizations, Alaska Native Tribal organizations, area nonprofits and local residents .

## REGIONAL OVERVIEW

The 16.8-million-acre Tongass National Forest, the largest in the US, stretches approximately 500 miles along the Southeast Alaska panhandle. Yakutat Bay marks the northwestern boundary of the Tongass; the National Forest extends south to Metlakatla and the tip of Prince of Wales Island. The Tongass includes a narrow strip of mainland terrain, with sharp-edged mountains, icefields, and deep fjords. This rugged coast faces out onto thousands of offshore islands. Together, the islands and mainland provide an abundance of protected bays, coves, and passages, and nearly 11,000 miles of meandering shoreline.

This expansive, complex stretch of North America's western coast provides a hard-to-match setting for outdoor adventures, featuring largely wild, roadless and undeveloped public lands; dense forests, mountains, and glaciers; and rich, still living cultural traditions. Over 400 species of terrestrial and marine wildlife, fish, and shellfish abound. Some species, such as the bald eagle and the brown bear, endangered in other parts of the United States, thrive in the Tongass. The Federal government manages 94 percent of the land in Southeast Alaska, including 17 designated wilderness areas within the Tongass National Forest. Embedded in the Tongass are a set of attractive, compact, and walkable small towns – rare in Alaska and a key part of what draws residents and visitors to the area.

All these lands are the traditional homelands of the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian nations, with a history extending back more than 10,000 years. The people of these nations ***maintain a deep connection to the lands and waters of Southeast Alaska and the critical resources that sustain their ways of life.*** Alaska Natives account for approximately 25 percent of Southeast's population and are a strong part of the present day cultural and economic life in the Tongass. Sealaska is the regional ANCSA Corporation in the Tongass and has shown growing support for sustainable tourism and stewardship.

The subregion's population is approximately 72,000 people spread across 35,138 square miles living in 31 communities. The three largest communities —Juneau, Ketchikan, and Sitka — account for 75 percent of the population. Extreme topography and scattered islands make most of the communities accessible only by boat or plane.

Southeast's economy is dominated by public sector jobs in local, state and federal governments, which together make up approximately 30% of all jobs and just under 35% of regional wages. The visitor industry, seafood and health care sectors are the next three largest sectors, together comprising approximately 30% of all jobs.

Trails in the Tongass support recreation and community life, subsistence, and health, and provide necessary infrastructure for many businesses. Use of trails for all these purposes, by both residents and visitors, is strong and growing, even as USFS resources to meet this demand decline.



## CURRENT USES AND TRENDS

### **1. Outdoor Recreation is a Major, Growing Economic Force**

The growing economic benefits of outdoor recreation and trails are well documented. The USFS recently made a strong national commitment to manage USFS resources to improve local economies and support outdoor recreation, in the Recreation Economy for Rural Communities (RERC) program:

*“The economic impact of outdoor recreation near our national forests and grasslands is vital to support health and prosperity in rural America,” said USFS Chief Randy Moore. “Efforts to reinvigorate main streets through the Recreation Economy for Rural Communities program is an important step to help communities realize all the benefits that adjacent national forests and grasslands make possible.”*

Growing the economic benefits of outdoor recreation creates needed jobs and business opportunities in the Tongass. This economic activity also generates funding, for example local government tax revenue that could go back into trails and other recreation facilities that drive that economic growth.

- In 2021, outdoor recreation contributed \$454 billion to the U.S.’s gross domestic product, 1.9% of total GDP.
- In Alaska, outdoor recreation contributed \$2.1 billion (3.6%) to the State’s GDP in 2021. Alaska also had the second fastest growing Outdoor Recreation sector in the nation.
- Even without the COVID pandemic, Alaska’s economy, population, and fiscal health have all trended down in recent years, following the decline in oil revenues and related State government spending. Alaska has seen a significant exodus in working-age people over the last decade. Outdoor recreation offers one of Alaska’s best opportunities to change these trends.
- The experience of outdoor Alaska is the driving force behind out-of-state travel to Alaska, which accounts for 1 in 10 jobs and over \$3.2 billion in spending in the state. Between 2013-2019, while Alaska’s economy was sliding into recession, outdoor recreation was one of the few sectors of the state’s economy that grew.
- If out-of-state visitors had reasons to add one more day to their Alaska visit, the result would be an additional \$250 Million a year in annual visitor spending.

### **2. Skyrocketing demand for active outdoor recreation driven by residents and independent travelers**

Interest in trails, camping and other active outdoor recreation activities continues to grow, nationwide and in Alaska. The 2022 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) used anonymous cell phone data to track outdoor recreation trends 2019-2021. This research showed the total numbers of outdoor recreational users in Alaska increased substantially between 2019 and 2021, from 1.0 million mobile phone “device days” to 1.5 million, despite a dramatic drop off in cruise visits.

- 2019: a strong cruise year, with 1.4 million cruise visits, 60 percent of all out-of-state visitors.
- 2020: the COVID pandemic meant no cruise visitors, but the gap in recreational use on public lands was filled in much of Alaska – but not in Southeast – by independent travelers and increased use by state residents.
- 2021: just 115,000 cruise visitors, but in the wake of COVID, a continuing surge of independent travelers, leading to a net increase in out-of-state summer visitors to Alaska between 2019-21, along with a big increase in Alaskans visiting public recreation sites statewide.

### **3. Evolution in demand for trails by residents and visitors**

- Nationwide, the fastest growing outdoor recreation activities 2019-2021 were day hiking, camping, and bicycling. Evidence to date shows these trends were “sticky”, meaning participation in outdoor recreation use is staying above pre-COVID levels.
- The SCORP process included surveys of Alaska residents and land managers, giving a picture of outdoor recreation trends. While interests are diverse, the most popular and fastest growing activities are nearby, non-motorized uses like neighborhood strolling, biking, hiking, and cross-country skiing.

*“Alaskans visited their state parks in record numbers in 2020, turning to affordable outdoor camping and hiking for relief from the contagion fears, social distancing restrictions and economic impacts related to the COVID-19 pandemic. People have rediscovered the benefits of getting outside into the fresh air.” (Anchorage Daily News, Sept, 2022)*

- Between 2011-16, for both independent and cruise out-of-state Alaska visitors, hiking and nature walks were the fastest growing area of participation of all visitor activities.
- Guided by social media, online maps, and Alaska “reality TV”, Alaska’s tourism industry is changing, with a growing percentage of travelers seeking active, intimate, self-directed outdoor experiences.  
*“COVID accelerated a change that’s been happening over the last 10 years – a big shift in Alaska tourism. The traditional, older demographic – 65 plus – is still coming but we are seeing more families and young couples, looking for active outdoor adventure. They want to get out and experience Alaska in person, in small groups or independently,” (Alexis Shubin of Alaska Wildland Adventures).*

### **4. Tourism’s connection to outdoor recreation in Southeast Alaska**

Southeast’s marine environment and concentration of cruise visitors (86 percent in SE vs. 55 percent statewide) make tourism and outdoor recreation different in the Tongass relative to the rest of Alaska. The most recent Alaska Visitor Statistics Program VII (2016) gives details of these differences<sup>6</sup>:

- Southeast Alaska is the most visited of Alaska’s 5 regions: 67% of summer visits compared to 52% in Southcentral and 29% in Interior. While SE attracts more visitors, compared to Southcentral, Southeast supports fewer jobs (11,925 vs. 20,700) and less labor income (\$445M vs. \$761M). The visitor industry plays its biggest economic role in Southeast, where it provided 23% of all employment, compared to Southcentral at 7%.
- Cruise visitors spend few nights in SE communities, which helps explain the difference in average spending: cruise travelers spend an average of \$600 in Alaska, vs. \$1600 per trip by air/independents.
- Over 90 percent of visitors to Juneau, Ketchikan, Skagway, Glacier Bay, and Hoonah were cruise visitors. Sitka (82 percent) and Haines (69 percent) had slightly lower rates of cruise visitors, while Prince of Wales, Petersburg, Wrangell, and Gustavus had much lower cruise visitor rates. Most of the differences in visitor characteristics between individual SE communities is tied to the proportion of cruise visitors.
- Wrangell visitors averaged the longest length of stay in Alaska, at 17.2 nights, followed by Petersburg, Gustavus, and Haines visitors at 13.0, 12.2, and 11.2 nights, respectively. The average stay in Alaska for all out-of-state visitors is 9 nights. Of Southeast non-cruise visitors who purchased a multi-day package, nearly 8 in 10 were fishing lodge packages.
- While Southeast visitors are very likely to recommend Alaska (80 percent), they are less likely to intend to return to the state in the next five years and less likely to have traveled to Alaska previously (31 percent for both measures) than independent and other visitor categories.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.alaskatia.org/marketing/alaska-visitors-statistics-program-avsp-vii>

- POW visitors were far more likely to intend to return to Alaska in the next five years (79 percent), compared to 31 percent of all Southeast visitors. POW visitors were also more likely to rate their Alaska trip as a much better value for the money compared to other destinations (43 percent rated Alaska much better, compared to 17 percent of Southeast visitors)

As mentioned above, the COVID pandemic battered Southeast's cruise-based tourism economy and the outfitter/guide economy. 2022 saw significant improvements and 2023 is expected to equal or exceed pre-COVID cruise visits.

#### **5. *Changes in types of outdoor recreation***

- In addition to an overall growth in demand for trails, specific types of trail uses are growing and changing, including the still expanding interest in mountain biking and public use cabins. Improved gear is driving more winter trail use, including fat tire bikes and backcountry "earn your turns" skiing.
- Four-season growth in e-bikes is outpacing all these trends: "The latest figures indicate a growth rate for electric bicycles of 240% in the 12 months leading up to July 2021. General cycling equipment only grew at a rate of 15%, showing that electric bicycles are leading the overall growth in the cycling industry."<sup>7</sup>

#### **6. *Demand for shore access for small cruise ships and active adventure options for large cruise ships***

- Demand for on-shore walking and hiking by small cruise passengers is large and growing, according to both interviews with small cruise operators and the regional economic development strategies published by the Juneau Economic Development Council.
- Rangers and tourism operators anticipate a very large increase (30-60) in the number of small cruise boats being built for the Alaska market.
- The emerging consensus: current permitted locations are insufficient for the existing number of boats and passengers, and the gap between supply and demand will continue to grow without identification of new locations.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://electrek.co/2021/10/05/electric-bicycle-sales-are-growing16x-higher-than-general-cycling-heres-why/>

## **FOREST-WIDE ISSUES ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

This section highlights opportunities and challenges for creating a more sustainable trail system in the Tongass, followed by sections that present recommended responses to these issues.

### **Issues**

#### **1. Friction in the System: USFS Policies and “Culture”**

The existing system of USFS policies and procedures creates multiple bottlenecks that create real challenges for developing a better, more sustainable trails system. These bottlenecks include lengthy, often costly approaches on every dimension of the trail development process, from hiring and paying staff, to issuing contracts, surveying trail conditions, cultural and environmental assessment, recreation data entry, and designing, approving, and building or maintaining trails. National laws like National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and USFS culture combine to create an agency slow to change, and with a bias towards elaborate processes over quick, tangible action. Two examples: the USFS Trails guidelines section 2300, sets out a five-year(!) process needed to develop a new trail. At a broader scale, while national USFS policy directives urge the agency to actively embrace partnerships and put more focus on outdoor recreation, these new directions tend to get a lukewarm reception in many ranger districts.

#### **2. A Rainforest Setting That Drives Up Costs to Build and Maintain Trails**

Wet soils and high rainfall in the Tongass make trails costly to build, especially compared to places where native soils provide the tread surface. These same conditions require technical expertise to design, construct, and maintain such trails. Trails built through muskegs and other poorly drained areas can require importing up to 100% of the trail tread material, pushing costs to \$500K to \$1M per mile. Steep slopes add additional costs, to manage erosion, heavy rainfall, and stream crossings. The remarkably rapid growth of dense vegetation further adds to maintenance costs. Fortunately, these same challenges – mountainous terrain, dense rainforest – are also a big part of what makes many Tongass trails so spectacular and rewarding.

#### **3. Climate Change Impacts**

Climate change is bringing outsized impacts in Alaska, although modeling indicates those changes will be less dramatic in coastal rainforest than locations further north. But warming temperatures and increased frequency of intense precipitation events will likely increase the environmental challenges for trails in the Tongass.

#### **4. Workforce, Partner Capacity and Logistical Challenges**

Limited availability of interested, qualified workers is currently a national challenge and a particularly acute issue in locations like SE Alaska, where living costs are high, housing is tight, populations are small, and many jobs are seasonal. The process of bringing supplies and materials is costly everywhere in SE Alaska, especially in smaller communities.

There are few local or regional partners or businesses available to assist with trail needs that have the skills and experience necessary to manage trails in such a challenging environment. The USFS will need partner groups that have the capacity and training to step up and support trail design, planning, construction, and maintenance on National Forest System lands. Southeast Alaska has a small population, and there are only a handful of groups that are actively engaging with the USFS on trails. These groups are maxing out and in some cases do not want to or cannot expand their support

#### **5. Federal Funding Ups and Downs**

The occasional “ups” but extended “downs” in USFS trail funding present a continuing, overarching challenge. Until very recently, USFS funding for recreation had been flat or declining, due to, in part,

increased spending nationally on wildfires, and the agency's continued focus on timber related activities (planning, permitting, harvest, restoration). Most recently, the Great American Outdoor Recreation Act and the Southeast Alaska Sustainability Strategy<sup>8</sup> brought in a wave of new funding, allowing the Tongass to begin hiring new recreation staff, and directing capital dollars to trail projects and other recreation-related projects. For a sustainable trail system that meets growing demands, even with a growing reliance on partners, the Tongass National Forest needs expanded, stable trail funding at a scale comparable to what is currently coming in with what may be one-time funds.

## **6. Land Ownership**

Land ownership in the Tongass is still fluid. Some lands currently held by the USFS may be conveyed to Native corporation ownership, which could affect trails, trails access, and use of associated lands currently open for public recreation by residents and businesses. In addition, there are State of Alaska land selections that have yet to be fully adjudicated.

Trail projects in the Tongass can also be complicated by land status, jurisdiction and ownership. This patchwork of land management in and around communities can necessitate the need to work with multiple landowners in order to establish trails that connect to National Forest System lands. The Forest Service needs to work in concert with others to bring about such trails. For trail work on non-National Forest System lands, leadership will need to come from communities, inviting the USFS and others to the table.

## **7. Challenges of USFS Land Management Designations and Policies**

Areas with wilderness designations limit the tools used for trail work, slowing trail maintenance, and increasing already high costs. Likewise limits on the size of commercial parties constrain the capacity of existing trails. While the TSTS can and should help inform future Tongass National Forest and partner decisions, many policies affecting intensity of use and options to construct, improve or decommission trails are controlled by nation-wide laws like NEPA, section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, and rules on uses in federally designated Wilderness. Despite those challenges, this topic deserves more thought, as recommendations for changes in access and permit rules could be one important, lower cost way to effectively expand the supply of trails in the Tongass.

## **Opportunities**

### **1. Tongass National Forest Offers Remarkable Trail Recreation Resources**

As the overview Section above makes clear, the Tongass offers unique, world-class outdoor recreation resources, including stunning wild landscapes, rich and living cultural traditions, an extensive set of trails and cabins, and attractive small towns.

### **2. Tongass National Forest Staff and Funding**

As an organization, the USFS in Alaska and Tongass National Forest have a large, experienced, and dedicated staff, and access to substantial federal funding. After years of flat or declining outdoor recreation budgets, the Tongass has recently received a wave of new funding, including funds coming through the Great American Outdoors Act.

### **3. Potent, Growing, But Less Than Fully Developed Partnership Opportunities**

Two community-based nonprofits in the Tongass – Juneau Trail Mix and Sitka's Trail Works – have shown the power of partnerships in building and maintaining trails. These organizations can secure resources, including volunteers, to augment USFS funding, and are more nimble than the USFS in

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<sup>8</sup><https://media.ktoo.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/USDA-Southeast-Alaska-Sustainability-Strategy-Initial-Investment-Projects.pdf>

moving projects forward. Promising options exist for expanding partnerships, with potent groups like the Sustainable Southeast Partnership, Spruce Root, and Alaska Trails, as well as with fledgling community-based outdoor recreation organizations. Partnerships could be expanded by:

- At a bare minimum, creating a culture of responsiveness when approached by partners
- Sending USFS staff to participate in partner planning processes
- Sharing training resources with partners
- Consulting regularly with partners
- Including partners in internal USFS planning processes

### **Opportunity & Challenge Synthesis – A Trail System Not Meeting Growth Trends**

The combination of factors above has led to a Tongass National Forest trail system in trouble. While visitor and resident demand for trails continues to grow, a large portion of the Forest's extensive set of trails are overgrown and deteriorated, and few new trails have been built in the Tongass for decades. Many smaller communities – Kake and Hoonah for example – don't offer the trails most sought by residents and visitors, like a trail from town into surrounding USFS lands. More encouraging are the examples in Sitka and Juneau, which both have high quality trail systems, showing what is possible when a nonprofit partner, the USFS, the local government, businesses and users work together.

## COMMUNITY AND USER GROUP GOALS

### Overarching Trail Investment Goals and Criteria for Setting Priorities

The growing demand for trails, coupled with finite resources for trail work, requires balancing different trail investment goals. The broad national framework for trail goals is set out in the USFS *National Strategy for a Sustainable Trail System*<sup>9</sup> and the related 10-Year Trail Challenge – 2020 to 2030<sup>10</sup>. These national policies set the starting framework for this Tongass project. Two key excerpts are below:

- “Sustainability is achieved at the junction where trails are socially relevant and supported, ecologically resilient, and economically viable”.
- From the 10 Year Challenge: “Achieving a sustainable trail system requires a multiyear effort that is responsive to local needs and opportunities. The trails community must also have the support and flexibility to take action when and where it makes the most sense.”

Big improvements are needed for the Tongass National Forest trail system, including the processes, partnerships, and resources that support trail design and permitting, trail construction and maintenance. Outlined below are overarching goals for the Forest to guide these needed improvements, based on a synthesis of national directions and discussions with existing and prospective partners, user groups, and staff of the USFS and other land managers.

- 1. Expand and improve the Tongass trail system to meet growing demands. Deliver the benefits trails provide for local economies, health, culture, stewardship, and community and resident quality of life by:**
  - Growing community and Forest-wide partnerships, including making the significant USFS investments needed to create and sustain new partners
  - Expanding trail construction and maintenance resources, within the USFS and with partners
  - Revising USFS processes for trail design, permitting, construction and maintenance, to reduce the costs and time needed in each of these steps
- 2. Actively share responsibility for decision-making and trail construction, maintenance, and management with communities and USFS partners**
- 3. Invest in trail planning and trail improvements across lands in multiple ownerships**
- 4. Improve the criteria for Forest-wide trail investment decisions to better reflect and support differences in benefits, needs and capacity in different locations**
  - Improve or build trails in portions of the Forest where trail systems are underdeveloped, but are desired by communities and/or other user groups
  - Be open to construction of new trails where these bring significant benefits, rather than an exclusive focus on upgrades of established trails
  - Serve the needs of the full range of trail users, including residents and visitors, motorized and non; summer and winter, wilderness adventure and out-the-backdoor strolls
  - In the interest of the quality of the overall Tongass trail system, decommission lower value/higher cost trails where this action frees up resources for other trail projects
- 5. Highlight local and indigenous art and culture in conjunction with the USFS trail programs “Native/indigenous people are not just another stakeholder in SE”**
- 6. Work to change USFS culture, from a bias towards process, to a bias for action: “need to simplify everything”**

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/trails/national-strategy>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/trails/10YTC>

## RECOMMENDED FOREST-WIDE TRAIL PROJECTS

### 1. Recurring Categories of Forest-wide Priority Trails Needs

Communities all over Southeast Alaska want more and better trails, for residents, travelers, and tourism businesses. While needs vary between communities, there are some common, recurring needs, listed below. A consistent theme in all these objectives is projects that benefit residents and visitors.

- Trails starting or easily accessible from town, including connections between in-town visitor commercial services and surrounding natural areas. In many communities – Kake, Hoonah, and Juneau for example – reaching surrounding USFS natural areas from town requires securing multi-jurisdictional routes.
- Access into alpine areas; waterfront and waterway trails
- Diversity of trail types, including easy, larger volume pathways, to more primitive trails for residents and more adventurous travelers
- Trails to public use cabins, including multi-day hut to hut land and/or water trails (*more below*)
- For communities looking to attract visitors and visitor spending, at least one truly “5 star” trail attraction – a particularly memorable, beautiful, natural and/or cultural experience

### 2. Prioritize Trails to and between Public Use Cabins

In the rainy southeast climate, a cabin or a lodge makes a huge difference in people’s enthusiasm for getting out and enjoying the Tongass. Demand for public use cabins is large and growing, and – in some locations – substantially exceeds supply. Demand for high amenity cabins is strong whether accessible by trails, roads, boat-in (waterfront), or by air.

Cabins are not the focus of the Tongass Sustainable Trail Strategy but given the connection between trails and public use cabins, several trail/cabin-related strategies are listed below, based on feedback over the course of the project.

- Given the popularity of cabins, improved cabin access should be a priority, including new trails and upgrades and maintenance of existing trails. Likewise, the USFS and its partners should look for options for cabin-to-cabin, or lodge-to-lodge trips, including both hiking and water routes.
- USFS should look for ways to reduce costs to build and maintain cabins, including using standardized designs, and by clustering cabins to reduce logistics and costs of maintenance.
- New approaches are needed to help meet cabin demand. These include strategies to work with local partners and businesses to build and maintain individual cabins, and options to decommission lower use/higher cost cabins.

### 3. Respond to the Growing Demand for On-Shore Activities by Small Cruise Ships

Work is needed to provide new/expanded capacity small cruise on-land opportunities. This includes options for use of logging roads where these provide a high amenity experience, and options for better coordinating the timing of cruise visits. These approaches must consider relevant USFS management policies, for example, the overall Forest Land and Resource Management Plan and wilderness designation of locations like Admiralty Island.

Individual Ranger District chapters, particularly Sitka, include a start at identifying specific candidate sites, but more work is needed with operators and USFS staff to expand and refine this information. More trails capacity is also needed in places like Juneau and Ketchikan to accommodate growing interests in trail use by large cruise passengers and maintain quality trail experiences for residents.

### 4. Take Greater Advantage of Logging Roads

The Tongass has thousands of miles of logging roads, providing a potentially valuable but currently underdeveloped outdoor recreation resource. The existing set of logging roads include a mix from



those that are regularly maintained, to many that receive little or no maintenance, to roads that are closed or have been explicitly decommissioned, some of which are still used for recreation. Some of these roads could provide relatively affordable ways to respond to growing trail demand, including hiking, biking and motorized trail uses.

Taking advantage of logging roads for recreation will require a paradigm shift within the USFS and the outdoor recreation community, including:

- identifying and explicitly designating select roads as routes for hiking, skiing, ATV's
- retaining logging road bridges and culverts when timber activities conclude so roads remain functional
- building – often relatively short – trail connections between currently separated timber harvest roads, e.g., linking road systems in adjoining valleys, to create functional loops
- creating an explicit financial plan for ongoing maintenance (this could include a program akin to the State of Alaska's SnowTRAC program.)

### **5. Maintain Trails Beyond the First Mile**

While many Tongass trails are relatively short, there are many that extend a mile or more. Frequently, maintenance and repair is completed in this first mile and then the trail conditions deteriorate the further the trail travels from the trailhead. The causes of this phenomenon are simple, limited funding means that trail projects must prioritize the easiest, most visible and most used sections of trails. However, maintaining only these “first miles” means that longer-distance users suffer from a diminished trail experience.

### **6. Work to Establish Forest-Wide Trail Systems**

Organizations and individuals are interested in a coordinated Marine Highway/trail system extending the length of Southeast. Like other “long trails” this could help create a brand and an experience that could attract visitors to the region and individual communities along the route. Like other long trails, the route could be used in its entirety or in segments.

A long trail in the Tongass would likely require a series of hubs and trail spokes based out of Southeast communities, connected by private watercraft, air, and/or the Alaska Marine Highway. Where terrain and management goals permit, this could include cross island trails, for example on Mitkof Island, Prince of Wales Island or the cross-Admiralty Island trail. An associated information and marketing program would help such a trail become an economic boost to SE communities. Improving the SE Marine Highway system critical to this concept, and a high priority for SE Conference, communities, and legislators in the region<sup>11</sup>.

Culture and history could add significant value to this concept, incorporating information on traditional Tlingit trading and subsistence routes and more recent narratives including commercial fishing and the gold rush trail continuing through to the Chilkoot.

The two websites below provide a solid start at what could become a SE Long Trail information, and helpful information on existing trails in SE communities, focused on inviting independent travelers to explore and spend time and money in the region's smaller towns and villages.

- SEATrails project - <https://www.seatrails.org/> - this ambitious effort identified select trails in communities all over SE in the early 2000's. While the project has largely gone dormant, the goals remain valid, and the website is a valuable resource.
- Bird Trails <https://ak.audubon.org/southeast-alaska-birding-trail> - recently prepared, comprehensive, and includes clear, helpful community trail maps

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<sup>11</sup> The State has a long-term vision of a system of roads running between ferry terminals, setting up a ferry system more akin to Washington State – where ferries make short runs between ports, rather than running the length of Southeast Alaska.

## RECOMMENDED FOREST-WIDE GENERAL APPROACHES

### 1. Emerging Partnerships Opportunities In Southeast Alaska

As outlined in the Challenge Cost Share agreement directing this project, creating a more beneficial and sustainable Tongass trail system *requires* stronger partnerships. In much of the Tongass, that will only happen with a new level of commitment by the USFS to build partnership relationships, and in some cases helping to create new partnership organizations. The diagram below shows a generalized framework for an improved partnership system. Keys to success include the USFS actions listed below:

- Embrace the agency's changing role in this new environment. Take a fresh look at options to grow the capacity of existing and potential partners, including committing to sharing more trail-related planning, decision-making and other responsibilities.
- Partnerships are hard to achieve and steward when the USFS staff contacts for these partners change frequently. Staff from "outside" with little knowledge of communities, the Tongass, the partners or the ecosystem need time to build trust and knowledge to become effective representatives of the USFS in these partnerships. The revolving door of USFS staffing and the rarity that new staff come from or reside in the communities with whom they are tasked with building relationships damages the Forest's credibility and ability in partnership arrangements.
- Shift more responsibilities to partners for the process of planning and building trails, where these entities can save time and money. This could include contracting, trail design, construction, and maintenance (*see table in Section 2*).
- Work with partners to leverage finite USFS funding, both through access to non-USFS funding sources and cost reductions. Providing more predictable, sustainable partner funding is essential, for example, multi-year commitments for trail work, so partners can build up stable, capable trail construction and maintenance crews, both paid and volunteer.
- Accept that building partnerships requires a new mindset about partnerships, and significant upfront USFS investments of time, energy, funding, and – critically – relationship building. To establish the foundation for a sustainable trails system, the USFS needs to better understand and support partner priorities and needs. Specific USFS work needed:
  - *Where USFS has existing trail partnerships* – in Juneau and Sitka – work to strengthen these relationships and increase partner capacity to support community and USFS projects. This can be done, for example, by shifting work to these partners who can do this more quickly and at a lower cost than the USFS, such as contracting for trail construction.
  - *Where existing organizations are present with potential to be USFS partners*, such as the Sustainable Southeast Partnership (SSP)<sup>12</sup>, Spruce Root, Tlingit Haida Central Council and Sealaska, actively reach out to determine if/how/where partnerships could be mutually beneficial. For example, Tlingit Haida Central Council<sup>13</sup> hosts the successful Alaskan Youth Stewards Program which works on trails and stewardship projects.
  - *Where there is a need for local partners, but none currently exist*, make the active effort to see if and how partner organizations could come into existence, for example on Prince of Wales Island. First steps include connecting with motivated individuals with an interest in trails (e.g., users, tribes, communities, users, local governments) and connecting them with established community or Forest-wide nonprofits, who could provide advice and support. Connecting such groups with the National Park Service Rivers Trails Conservation Assistance program is a related option.

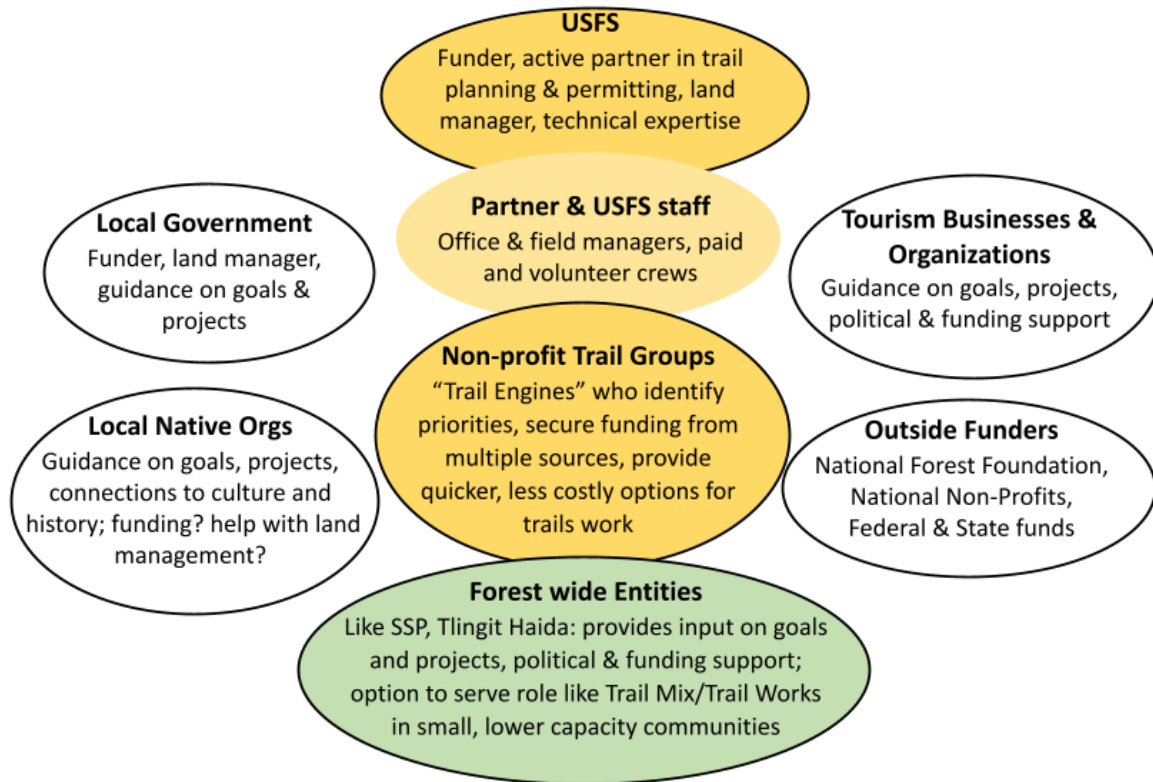
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<sup>12</sup> Sustainable Southeast Partnership <https://sustainablesoutheast.net/>

<sup>13</sup> Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes <http://www.ccthita.org/>

Sustainability requires “all-hands-on-deck” solutions. The generous, successful trail systems in Juneau and Sitka only exist because of decades of hard work by passionate, adequately funded local trail organizations, closely allied with a range of partners, including Tongass National Forest staff.

Producing similar results in other Forest locations will require proactive work by the USFS, to identify, reach out, nurture and in some cases help create similar partners. Proactive work is needed to better understand the needs, interests, and capabilities of existing and potential partnership organizations around the Forest. Where community size permits, having an organization rooted in a single community is ideal; in smaller communities this function might be carried out through partnerships with Forest-wide or statewide partners or the expansion of existing trail organizations.



### A Sustainable Trail System Requires a Coordinated ‘Ecosystem’ of Partners

#### 2. Improve the Trails Design and Approval Process

*“Everything is a 1000X easier outside the USFS”*

The USFS process to design and permit new trails is slow, with the standard process requiring five years, and with multiple “structural bottlenecks” which can cause additional delays. Frequent limitations on available staff create further bottlenecks. While recognizing NEPA and related rules still need to be followed, multiple parties involved in this TSTS project, including USFS staff, all agreed the process should be and can be simplified and accelerated.

The table below gives a starting point for how the process might be improved. USFS staff and partners need to further refine this initial information. Overarching themes for improvements include:

- Take more advantage of tools USFS has but often doesn’t use, for example, contractor IDIQ’s

- Develop and wherever possible use standardized design templates
- Wherever possible, use the “design build” contract approach successfully used by AK State Parks
- Consider creating USFS support team(s) devoted to trail work, including a NEPA specialist, cultural resource/heritage specialist, landscape architect, engineer, and a recreation planner with trails experience. This kind of team could accelerate the planning and approvals on projects with existing funding, as well as creating an inventory of shovel-ready projects, poised to take advantage of funding as it becomes available.

Phases	Average Lead Time (Years)	Options for Partner Support
Programming	5	Community plans, like those in Sitka and Juneau, and the TSTS, could fill this need, and set the stage for community support. USFS staff could be one part of planning teams.
Reconnaissance	4	Non-profit partners could carry out significant portions of this work, and – if contractors are required – hire and manage those with less time and expense. USFS staff could set objectives for work products and consult during the process.
		Government-to-government
		Jointly by USFS and partners
Location Survey	2	- New survey technologies can reduce costs and speed survey processes, especially for trails crossing exclusively through lands in a single ownership - See notes below & in Section 3 regarding options for trail design and cost estimates
Project or Contract Preparation	1	Alaska has a small but growing group of skilled nonprofit and private trail contractors who, working under USFS approved guidelines, can design and construct sustainable trails in the field
Construction	0	Nonprofits can issue Requests For Proposals (RFPs), award and administer contracts with less “red tape” than what is required of the USFS

### 3. Invest In Multi-Jurisdictional Trails and Community/Partner-Driven Trails Planning

This strategy has two elements:

- *Community-scale trails plans* – Locally prepared trails/recreation plans in Sitka, Juneau, Yakutat, and Wrangell have set the stage for real progress. In Sitka, for example, the signatures of support on a Memorandum of Understanding between land management agencies, a trail nonprofit and community partners led to millions of dollars in trail grants. To be successful, these plans need local leadership to guide the work, and a public process that identifies the highest priorities. The plan needs to be developed by a dedicated team of “implementers”, who want to be involved and ultimately formally support the plan. This includes agencies and other major landowners, the local government, tribes/corporations, user groups, and tourism and business organizations. The community scale work that is part of this Sustainable Trails Strategy aims at the same objectives.
- *From community-based trail project priorities to trail construction* – The table above gives a general picture of the USFS trail design, approval, and construction process. The section below provides

details about that process in the Tongass, and options for how it might be simplified or accelerated.

One reference for an improved process is the trails process in Chugach State Park. There are important differences in the two areas, including constraints tied to use of federal funds, and the high costs of construction in Southeast. Despite these differences, the fundamental steps in both locations are similar. In Chugach State Park that process takes two years or less vs. the five or more in the Tongass.

- a. *Trail Plan* – Start the process with a community/agency plan identifying priority trail projects, including general objectives for trail use, users, and a route – including maps and cost estimates. This process creates what are in effect “mini-design narratives” for locally identified priority trail projects. These plans provide an important way to identify multijurisdictional trails.
- b. *Design Narrative* – For a specific project identified as a high priority in the community trails plan, develop a written trail design narrative. This narrative needs to provide details on trail type, grades, widths, materials, uses, seasons, and bridges, including types, numbers, and lengths. The narrative needs to include a refined trail route, based on aerial photography, GPS and/or LiDAR, and based on this set of information, an estimate of trail costs. The design narrative process should include informal, upfront work to identify any significant environmental, cultural and/or user issues and incorporate needed mitigation strategies, for example, routing a trail around an important cultural site, or responding to concerns by affected user groups.

Options to improve? This step can be completed by an experienced, capable nonprofit, USFS Landscape Architect, or engineering or landscape architect firm. Doing this work in partnership with a local trail nonprofit will often be the quickest and most effective approach. See also suggested below under Survey and Design/Contract

- c. *NEPA review* – Use the design narrative as the “proposed action” for required NEPA review. Circulate the design narrative for required expert review by USFS and other agency resource specialists, as well as public review by trail user groups, tribe, communities, and project neighbors. Once the specified review period is complete, use this feedback to refine the trail design narrative. According to USFS staff, with a good design narrative, changes at this point tend to be both limited and, where needed, helpful.

Options to improve? For most trails, environmental and cultural impacts are minimal, particularly when compared to the impacts of logging. Despite that reality, NEPA review by USFS staff happens slowly, often adding a full extra field season and a year to the process, even where impacts are minimal. Going forward, Tongass National Forest leadership should resolve to complete both the design narrative and NEPA review in no more than a year, using previous environmental/cultural impacts analysis as a template to characterize impacts.

- d. *Survey and design/contract preparation documents* – At this step another level of detail is added to the trail design: the survey and design/contract documents. This step includes field work with preliminary staking to create a detailed trail log for every discrete trail segment. This step traditionally requires a full field season including a separate USFS engineering review and approval process for structural elements including bridges. The results of this work are then incorporated into a full federal contract, following a standardized, established format.

Options to improve? Between the design narrative, NEPA review, and this survey and design/contract step, the current process requires three separate fieldwork steps, and

potentially three separate field seasons. The USFS, working with experienced trail planners, should investigate ways to simplify this costly process. One option would be consolidating the first two steps, or at minimum, insuring these happen in a single season. A second option, commonly used in locations where environmental conditions are less challenging, is to set up the contract on a “design-build” basis, relying on the contractor to make final, in-field decisions on the precise trail routes consistent with the trail narrative. This could work best in locations where environmental conditions are less challenging, and/or where work in comparable locations provides a reference for an acceptable construction cost estimate. In this mode, contracts could be set on a time and materials, not-to-exceed basis.

- e. *Release timely requests for proposals for trail construction* – Requests for proposals for trail construction should be released in the fall, to provide contractors sufficient notice to be ready for work in the following summer season.

#### Summary of options to improve this process

The crux of a better trail process is speeding and simplifying (but not eliminating) the five steps outlined above. Options include:

- The USFS needs to apply the same focused energy, field crews, and money for trails that have been applied in the past to timber sales. Leadership at the top and District Rangers must buy into the goal of simplifying and speeding up the trail process, in particular, by dedicating sufficient staff time to get through steps like NEPA review and contract preparation in weeks or months not years.
- Given the multiple internal steps in the process, the Tongass needs a trails-specific position (the trails czar!) with the responsibility and authority to keep all the steps on schedule. Current trail related positions cover other important subjects, but don’t have this responsibility or clout.
- Need to actively explore and follow new approaches to speed the process, including shifting more responsibilities to nonprofits and/or contractors for trail work, and combining field work steps.
- The USFS current contracting process is a major source of delay. Themes for progress include improving USFS staff resources for getting contracts prepared and approved, and regular use of a list of pre-qualified contractors who can be hired without bidding or other time-consuming steps.
- *See workforce section below for additional recommendations on that topic*

#### **4. Expand the Trail Workforce, for All Steps of the Trail Development Process**

Southeast Alaska presents challenges for meeting workforce needs, for trails and other work categories. Reasons include costly housing, high cost of living, seasonality of many jobs, limited opportunities for training and advancement, and the reality that not everyone appreciates the inclement weather and small, isolated towns in the Tongass. Specifically for the USFS, until very recently, the combination of tight funding and a focus on issues other than outdoor recreation left the Tongass with limited staff for trails work. A new wave of federal funds is allowing much needed expansion of National Forest recreational positions. Because these positions will be responsible for newly funded recreation projects, such as the recently allocated \$14.5 M for public use cabins on the Tongass and Chugach National Forests, trails-related staff capacity may still be insufficient.

Recommended solutions to workforce issues are outlined below, including trail planning, permitting and field work. A theme in all these strategies is increasing the stability and skills of in-field trail staff.

- *Build/rebuild core trail competencies* – Over the last decade the USFS lost landscape architecture positions and individuals with critical trail skills and experience. The cadre of skilled trail

contractors working in the Tongass is very limited, and key individuals are approaching the end of their careers<sup>14</sup>. The USFS needs an explicit plan – a trails workforce initiative – designed to accelerate training of a new generation of trail planners and trail builders, who know the challenges of trail building in SE from sharpening a chainsaw to the logistics of helicopters. This workforce initiative needs to include both recently hired USFS landscape architects, USFS trail crew leaders, and private sector contractors. The lack of such personnel may become the biggest near-term barrier to improving the Tongass trail system.

- *Make outdoor recreation jobs (at the USFS and regional partners) more attractive through benefits beyond wages.* Particularly for seasonal positions, options include subsidized housing and skill-building programs (more on this below). Flexible work hours and/or part time positions, which allow more time to enjoy outdoors Alaska, can be another important, non-salary benefit for many employees.
- *Build a stronger career pipeline* – Training programs for field-based trail workers provide two big benefits 1) by opening the possibility of moving into well paid, full-time positions, these programs create greater interest in seasonal positions, and 2) they bring on-the-ground experience into other types of outdoor recreation work. The classic American story of an entry-level worker becoming project manager and then program director should be available in the trails/outdoor recreation field. Improving the career pipeline requires new skills development programs and revising traditional job requirements so field experience can set the stage for career advancement.
- *Increase salaries* – Over the last 30 years, average wages in Alaska have slipped from 15% to just 7% above “lower 48” averages. Higher wages in Alaska have long been essential to attract workers who would otherwise not choose to work in Alaska. There are national rules regarding USFS wages, making it challenging but not impossible for Ranger Districts to offer competitive compensation.
- *Increase predictability* – The attraction and value of seasonal work grows if qualified seasonal workers have good odds of being rehired year after year, either by the USFS or trail partners. Finding new ways to provide increased stability needs to be a priority (see more in the funding section).
- *Unite nonprofit, public, and business partners to provide workforce solutions* – As is outlined in section 1 above, meeting workforce needs will require both expanding USFS trails staff and taking more advantage of the capabilities of partners and funders. Collaborating with and supporting programs like Tlingit Haida’s Alaska Youth Stewards program is a good way to both build trails and improve skills.

## **5. Grow Sustainable and Predictable Trails Funding; Be Smart with Funding that is Available**

This strategy includes expanding resources for trail work within and from outside the USFS, including dollars as well as volunteers. Specific approaches include:

- *Build new partnerships, new funding sources Forest-wide and beyond* – Forest-wide entities like the Sustainable Southeast Partnership, Spruce Root, Sealaska, Southeast Conference, and tourism businesses are all working for healthy and sustainable economies, communities, and cultures. These groups all see outdoor recreation and trails as a good way to reach these goals, and consequently all have untapped potential to augment USFS funding. Tapping into that potential requires the USFS to invest the time needed to build relationships and find common ground goals. Support is also available from outside the Forest, from traditional sources like the

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<sup>14</sup> One-on-one conversations with area experts report primarily just two capable contractors operating in SE: Oregon Woods, and John Swata out of Ketchikan

National Forest Foundation, federal and state programs, national nonprofits and wealthy individuals.

- *Link growing trail use with growing trail work revenues* – Without this connection, increased use simply increases the gap between needed and available funding. Solutions include user fees, private sector partnerships, and local community foundations. Perhaps the most important solution is bringing in more local government revenues, including sales tax, bed tax, commercial user fees, and the property tax revenues associated with recreation municipal service areas. One example is Juneau, where the City and Borough provides \$60,000/year to Trail Mix. Trail Mix can then leverage these funds to build and maintain local trails, helping make Juneau a better place to live and visit (which then helps generate more local revenue).



- *Divert more USFS funds into outdoor recreation in general, and trails in particular* – In Alaska and beyond, many parties recommend shifting a larger share of the overall USFS budget to outdoor recreation and trails. This is particularly relevant in the Tongass where recreation economic activity greatly exceeds the economic benefits of logging and other extractive industries. These policy decisions, including appropriations for trails, are set by congress and are outside the scope of the Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy or the influence of Tongass National Forest staff. However, community partners can advocate for increased trails funding and recreation investments.
- *Stewardship plans* - Existing trails, and especially any new trails, need to have stewardship plans that address how trails will be maintained over the long-term, including the role of partners. Stronger partnerships can be built through such stewardship planning and actions (also see other partnership strengthening recommendations throughout this Forest-wide section of the TSTS).
- *A systemic focus on reducing trail costs* – In addition to seeking out new sources of funding, equally important are steps to reduce costs. The strategies in Section 2 above outline one category of actions to reach that objective. But more broadly, USFS staff need to always be looking for cost savings in all aspects of the process to design, approve and construct trails. One specific, illustrative example, coming from interviews with USFS staff, is to be more efficient with trail project mobilization costs, by striving to adequately staff and complete work on a specific trail in a single season. In the past, trail funding and crews tended to be spread around the full Forest, which meant a trail project that could have been completed in a single season with adequate staffing instead gets stretched over two or more years, requiring mobilization of equipment and crews in outlying locations multiple times.
- *Plan for “feast and famine” federal funding cycles* – Strategies include:
  - For “feast” times: compile an inventory of worthy, “shovel ready” projects, so when money suddenly appears, as has been the case in recent years, work can start immediately. The USFS is currently in feast mode, including GAOA funding and \$14.5 M for cabins in the Alaska region.
  - On the “famine” side: All the steps outlined in this Forest-wide chapter aim at this challenge, including broadening funding sources, streamlining design and approval processes, and building up a system of capable trail partners all over the forest.



## 6. Use Trails to Do More for Economic Health

***There is a need and opportunity to improve economic health in Southeast Alaska.*** Smart investments in trails and related outdoor recreation activities offer what is likely SE Alaska's best opportunity to expand jobs and business opportunities. Investments in trails give reasons for visitors to add a day to their travels and add \$10's of millions in local spending each year, and at the same time improve the quality of life that attracts and holds residents.

Recent USFS national directives make clear that all national forests, including the Tongass, need to focus more on expanding outdoor recreation and growing healthier community economies. These national directives include the "Reimagine Recreation" program, the SOAR Act working through Congress (more below), and the "Recreation Economy for Rural Communities" (RERC) planning assistance program<sup>15</sup>. Listed below are three actions identified in the RERC program

- "Ensuring local residents, including young people, have opportunities to engage with nearby outdoor assets to foster community pride, good stewardship, and local economic benefits."
- "Creating or expanding trail networks to attract overnight visitors and new businesses and foster use by local residents."
- "Developing in-town amenities, such as broadband service; electric vehicle charging stations; housing; or shops, restaurants, or breweries, to serve residents and attract new visitors and residents with an interest in nearby outdoor assets."

Tongass Forest staff and policies need to work in partnership with communities, to better understand their specific interests in improved trails and related economic health. Not every community is looking to invite growth and development. For those that are, examples of trail-related economic development strategies include:

- *Recruiting independent travelers* While use of trails is growing by both cruise and independent travelers, and both provide significant economic benefits, independent travelers spend significantly more than cruise travelers. The types of trails listed in Section G above will help attract independent travelers and their spending on local lodging, food, guides, gear and tours. A specific objective for trail investments is providing outdoor adventure for the "missing middle" of the recreation spectrum – the experiences for users who want adventure and access to spectacular places, but also want a comfortable bed, good food and comfort at the end of the day. "Missing middle" facilities include public use cabins, hut-to-hut or inn-to-inn trails, and quality wayfinding including trail signs and maps.
- *Support Outfitter/Guides and other Commercial users* – Congress is in the process of refining and is expected to soon adopt the "Simplifying Outdoor Access for Recreation (SOAR) Act"<sup>16</sup>. That act sets forth improvements in policies affecting commercial recreation permits and other recreational activities on federal recreational lands and waters. Existing rules constrain opportunities and increase costs for businesses operating in the Forest, including demanding, end-of-season reporting processes.
- *Better Marketing* The USFS should collaborate with local Chambers of Commerce, businesses, trail nonprofits, and others to provide better information on Tongass trails. A particular focus should be attracting more off-season activities, which helps extend visitor seasons and living-wage jobs.

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<sup>15</sup> Recreation Economy for Rural Communities planning assistance program

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/news/releases/biden-harris-administration-help-rural-communities-grow-outdoor-recreation-economy>

<sup>16</sup> Simplifying Outdoor Access for Recreation Act <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/1229>

- *Make the Case* The USFS should actively promote the economic benefits of trails. Chapter 2 of the recently released Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan is good source of information on the breadth and depth of economic benefits of trails<sup>17</sup>.

## **7. Support for Subsistence and Expanded Experiences of Culture, History, and Art**

More can be done to incorporate Southeast Alaska art, history and culture into trail experiences. This area of Alaska has a rich and vibrant Alaska Native culture, tracing its roots back more than 10,000 years, with distinct, unique art forms and vibrant cultural values and traditions.

- *Indigenous wayfinding* should be incorporated into design, signage, and place names, but in a manner more significant than a simple, perfunctory land acknowledgement.
- *Access to subsistence resources* – For all types of SE residents, access to and protection of subsistence resources is an important trail objective, along with safe travel in bear country.

To reach these objectives, reaching out to indigenous communities needs to be a stronger Tongass Forest priority. This will require working actively to build relationships and support with native tribes, organizations, and corporations, which in turn requires meeting subsistence, stewardship, and cultural health needs. “Native/indigenous people are not just another stakeholder in SE.”

## **8. Expand Trails Capacity Through Policy Changes**

Responding to the growing demands for trails can include building new trails, but also – as this strategy proposes – modifying policies affecting allowed numbers of trail users, both for commercial and non-commercial user activities. One priority should be finding options to change allowed party size for small cruise on-land experiences. For example, if commercial parties could allow 12 clients *plus* two guides (instead of the current policy with sets limits at 12 *including* guides) the result is a 20% increase in capacity, without constructing new trails.

## **9. Invest Upfront In Sustainable Trail Design And Construction**

Sustainable, built-to-last trail design is key to simultaneously meeting economic, social and environmental objectives. Sustainable design considers not just the initial construction, but also the full lifetime needs of trails. Constructing well-designed, well-built, and correctly located trails provides high quality experiences, protects the environment, reduces ongoing maintenance costs, and attracts the support of partners and communities.

## **10. Minimize Potential Trail User Conflicts**

Conflicts over different types of trail use and escalating numbers of users on specific trails are growing concerns across National Forest system lands. Potential *types* of use issues include, for example, conflicts between motorized and non-motorized uses, or between walking and biking, especially with the growing use of e-bikes.

With the right design and management, shared use trails often can successfully reduce or eliminate these potential conflicts, for example through separating use on different days. “Expectation management” is also important. Some trails, for example those at the Mendenhall Glacier, are known to be heavily used, and for many people that is acceptable and even preferred.

Most Tongass trails have relatively low levels of trail use, and different types of users can often share the same trail with little or no conflict. Conflicts between different types of trail users are less of an issue in the Tongass today than in other Alaska and U.S. locations. The abundance of motorized opportunities on logging roads helps reduce this potential conflict category. Small cruise operators and wildlife-focused outfitters and guides have, however, expressed concern about overcrowding on trails, for example the Lake Eva Trail, which reduces the sense of wildness travelers are seeking. Cruise industry operators also expressed concerns about conflicts between bear hunting vs. small

<sup>17</sup> Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan <https://www.alaskacorp.org/>

cruise wildlife viewing and hiking. Options to address both these issues include ongoing coordination between different types of users, and the possibility of identifying new locations for small cruise boats to visit, in locations with the necessary anchorages, trails, and other amenities.

### **11. Better Reflect and Support Differences in Needs and Capacity in Different Locations; Revise the Criteria for Trail Investment Decisions**

Sustainable solutions need to reflect the substantial variations in quality of existing trails systems and current levels of local capacity and local needs in different locations. For example, Sitka and Juneau have benefited from decades of active nonprofit trail organizations, and a relatively high level of consistent USFS staffing. Prince of Wales Island (POW), by contrast, is characterized by neglected trails and USFS staff reductions. On POW this has led to a negative feedback loop, where loss of USFS staff leads to continuing reductions in capacity to maintain trails, and further declines in trail quality and use.

#### ***Emphasize investments in trail projects that:***

- a. Have strong local support, including local user groups, local governments and tribes
- b. Respond to identified growth and change in demands for types and numbers of trail use/users including residents and visitors, motorized and non; summer and winter, wilderness adventure and out-the-backdoor strolls
- c. Are good for residents and visitors
- d. Have good prospects for partner support, such as maintenance or construction funding
- e. Improve or build trails in portions of the Forest where trail systems are underdeveloped, but are desired by communities and/or other user groups
- f. Make significant contributions to local community economic health, specific considerations include:
  - Economic goals as defined by individual communities
  - Recognizing that adding even a few jobs in a small community can be very important
- g. Contribute to community quality of life and public health; specific considerations include
  - Expanding accessibility and ease of use, such as trails that link town to outlying areas
  - Trails that invite outdoor activity for all age groups and abilities, including good trail access in underserved areas and for lower income households
- h. Highlight local and indigenous art and culture in conjunction with the USFS trail program
- i. Contribute to environmental stewardship and minimal/acceptable environmental impacts
- j. Help serve the needs of the full range of trail users,
- k. Provide new trails where these bring significant benefits, as well as upgrades of established trails
- l. As appropriate, decommission lower value/higher cost trails where this action frees up resources for other high value trail projects

### **12. Ensure High Quality Ranger District Leadership**

The management styles, goals and work habits of individual district rangers are quite variable across the Tongass, with significant consequences for the future of those Ranger Districts and the quality of their trail systems. Some District Rangers take an active interest in building partnerships and finding ways to minimize the steps required for trail planning, permitting and construction.

While recognizing the USFS has traditionally given District Rangers significant independence, if the Forest is sincere in wanting to create an improved, more sustainable trail system, the Forest as a whole and District Rangers in particular need encouragement to increase their support for trails. This includes more active support for the national and Forest-wide directives calling for more partnerships and more support for trails and local economic development. Implementing this recommendation is another example of the need for a USFS “culture change”, where trails and outdoor recreation becomes a Forest-wide priority, which is not the current reality.