

Why GAO Did This Study

The Tongass National Forest, managed by the Forest Service within USDA, is located in southeast Alaska and is the nation's largest national forest. Since the early 20th century, the Tongass has had a timber program based on harvesting old-growth trees, which are generally more than 150 years old. In 2010, USDA announced its intent to transition the Tongass timber program to primarily harvest young growth, in part to help conserve remaining old-growth forest while maintaining a viable timber industry. As part of the planned transition, the Forest Service and other federal agencies identified actions they would take to support several economic sectors in southeast Alaska.

This report describes (1) steps the Forest Service has taken to assess whether its planned transition will meet the agency's goal regarding a viable timber industry in southeast Alaska, (2) the status of actions the Forest Service and other federal agencies stated they would take to support the timber industry and other economic sectors during the transition, and (3) options suggested by agency stakeholders for improving the Forest Service's management of the Tongass timber program. GAO reviewed laws and agency documents related to the Tongass and interviewed federal agency officials and representatives from a nongeneralizable sample of 30 stakeholder organizations—including tribal, state, and local governments and industry and conservation entities—selected to provide a range of perspectives.

The Forest Service generally agreed with GAO's findings.

View [GAO-16-456](#). For more information, contact Anne-Marie Fennell at (202) 512-3841 or fennella@gao.gov.

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TONGASS NATIONAL FOREST

Forest Service's Actions Related to Its Planned Timber Program Transition

What GAO Found

The Forest Service has initiated some steps to assess whether its planned transition to young-growth harvest on the Tongass National Forest will support a viable timber industry in southeast Alaska—a goal the Department of Agriculture (USDA) established as part of the transition. For example, the Forest Service reported refining the data it uses to estimate the amount of young-growth timber to be available for harvest over the next 100 years. Forest Service officials stated the agency also began a study in 2015, partly in response to a recommendation that year from a USDA-convened advisory committee, to compare potential market prices for young-growth timber or products to the cost to harvest and process the timber, information that may help the agency assess the economic viability of a young-growth industry in the region. The agency expects the initial results from the study to be available in 2017.

USDA and the Forest Service identified various actions they and other federal agencies would take to support four economic sectors—timber, fishing and aquaculture, tourism and recreation, and renewable energy—during the transition to young-growth harvest on the Tongass, and the agencies have taken steps to implement some of these actions. For example, USDA stated that the Forest Service would improve its planning processes to assist the owners of small timber mills in the Tongass. According to Forest Service officials and documents, the agency has lengthened the duration of some timber sales to provide small timber mills some flexibility on when to harvest in the Tongass. However, the agencies have not implemented other actions identified. For example, the Forest Service has not implemented proposed funding increases for improving fish habitat and tourism facilities in the Tongass because of other spending priorities, according to Forest Service officials.

Representative from the 30 stakeholder organizations GAO interviewed identified options they said would improve the agency's management of the Tongass timber program. These options include improving the predictability of timber available for sale and increasing the agency's focus on small timber mills and other timber-related businesses. Forest Service officials said they have taken some steps to address these options. For example, the majority of the timber industry stakeholders GAO interviewed emphasized the importance of the Forest Service offering a predictable amount of timber for sale from year to year for the timber industry to be able to make decisions about how to retool to accommodate smaller-diameter trees—which they said is important given potential changes to the industry with the planned transition to harvest young-growth trees. In an effort to improve predictability, the Forest Service has coordinated with the Alaska Division of Forestry on the timing of timber sales to try to ensure a more predictable and even flow of timber. However, stakeholders also expressed divergent opinions regarding the overall direction of the Tongass timber program, including the volume and location of timber to be harvested.