

# ANCHORAGE DAILY NEWS

## To keep life in the forest, shift Tongass timber now

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Even when everything appears to stay the same, the way we see and understand the world around us advances ever onward. Science is continually expanding our knowledge of how nature works and how it fulfills our needs. In Alaska, we're learning how the ancient old-growth trees that enrich our lives and symbolize the Tongass National Forest are now more valuable than ever.

The Tongass also has a new generation of younger forest stands – places where trees have grown up after old-growth logging. These growing forests may not be as biologically rich for animals such as deer, but they are ready to play a new role in the economy of Southeast Alaska. This is a key takeaway from young-growth forest research conducted by The Nature Conservancy in Alaska and presented at the recent 2019 Southeast Alaska Young Growth Forestry Symposium in Ketchikan, an event sponsored by the U.S. Forest Service and the Alaska Department of Natural Resources Division of Forestry.

Some of the biggest trees in the Tongass are 800 years old. For more than 70 years, Alaska's old-growth trees have been viewed as a source of wood fiber, a product to be extracted and sold. The four-decade-long pulp mill era built communities, brought investments in vital infrastructure and added jobs where there were few before. But an industry with a voracious appetite for big old-growth trees isn't built to last. It was predestined to boom,

then dwindle, by design. Booms don't last. Not even the hardworking forests of the Tongass could outrun the coming bust.

What does this mean for today? The Tongass National Forest is left with a growing second generation of trees and a sharply diminished old-growth forest.

Science can tell us a lot about the value of a healthy old-growth forest. The places where Sitka spruce, hemlock, Western red cedar and Alaska yellow-cedar grow big and tall do so much to fulfill our needs: Think deer, salmon, clean water and a surprisingly massive carbon storehouse, for starters. It's a natural wonder that contributes greatly to the lure of a vacation to the Inside Passage, and so plays a big part in this growing sector of Alaska's economy. Left as is, healthy old-growth forest is a valuable asset that continues to pay dividends.

Meanwhile, we know the next-generation forest is here and in need of help, meaning restoration for wildlife and a range of forestry treatments that produce timber. There is now ample opportunity to provide local mills with young-growth trees, easing pressure on remaining old-growth forests. Entrepreneurial experiments in milling and marketing new value-added wood products are already underway. Making the shift now prepares communities for an industry that will see a tremendous surge in available timber volume as younger forests mature.

Research sheds welcome new light on the question of how many young-growth trees are available. High-tech light detection and ranging (LIDAR) mapping employs a sophisticated laser-measured surveying method employed from airplanes in today's forestry, engineering and scientific fields. It shows there are 9,000 acres of Tongass young-growth forest on Prince of Wales Island with trees of the right size for milling into wood products over the next decade, in accord with both private and U.S. Forest Service assessments. In fact, the Delaware-sized island has more than 68 million board feet of second-growth timber standing within a quarter-mile of an existing road. That's enough lumber to build more than 5,000 houses. It's available now.

Shifting timber harvest away from healthy old-growth forests and toward the new generation of young-growth trees provides an onramp to a successful and sustainable new era in the Tongass. We know building a new and different timber industry will be challenging. We also know it is the right thing to do.

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