

**File Code:** 1950**Date:** June 15, 2021**Route To:****Subject:** Project Initiation Letter - Thomas Bay YG Timber Sale**To:** Interdisciplinary Planning Team

The Petersburg Ranger District is proposing to complete an Environmental Assessment (EA) for young-growth timber harvest at Thomas Bay. This project initiation letter serves to outline expectations, assign key interdisciplinary team (IDT) members, describe IDT member roles and responsibilities, and identify a project timeline. The project purpose and need, as well as the proposed project, are described.

Core Team Members

I am assigning the following individuals to function as the IDT for the Thomas Bay Young Growth Timber Sale Project to identify issues related to the proposed action, develop alternatives, analyze for effects, and prepare the EA.

Role	Member
Team Leader	Carey Case
Fisheries Biologist	Eric Castro
GIS Specialist	Gene Primaky
Hydrologist	Heath Whitacre
Logging Systems Specialist	Nate Stearns
Silviculturist	Ben Case
Soils and Wetlands Specialist	Becki Reynolds
Transportation Engineer	Fernando Becerra Ochoa
Wildlife Biologist	Toby Bakos
Writer/Editor	Marina Whitacre

Support Team Members

The supporting resource specialists provide information about their resource, including preparation and review of the environmental documents, as required. The team leader will identify meetings for which attendance is required.



Role	Member
Botanist/Ecologist	Joni Johnson
Economist/Social Scientist	Jean Daniels
Geologist	Jim Baichtal
Heritage Specialist	Jane Smith / Gina Esposito
Landscape Architect	Danielle Snyder
Lands Specialist	Hillary Woods
Recreation Planner	Carin Christensen

Purpose and Need

This project responds to direction in the 2016 Tongass Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) specific to young-growth timber harvest. The purpose of this proposal is to move the project area toward desired future conditions by managing the timber resource for the production of sawtimber and other wood products, and providing a reliable and predictable flow of commercial timber to support jobs and income in timber and supporting industries in an economically efficient manner.

Young-growth timber provided by this project is needed to support the transition from a predominantly old-growth based timber industry to a predominantly young-growth based industry (Forest Plan, pp. 2-5, 5-2, 5-3, 5-4, 5-13 and 5-14). The offer of this timber would increase the amount of economically viable young-growth timber available, consistent with Forest Plan Objectives O-YG-01 and O-YG-02 (Forest Plan pp. 5-2, 5-3).

Proposed Action

In the Thomas Bay area, the Petersburg Ranger District proposes to supply approximately 25 million board feet (MMBF) of young-growth timber harvest, reconstruct temporary roads, and maintain National Forest System (NFS) roads. More specifically:

- Harvest up to 900 acres using even-aged management in the Scenic Viewshed and Modified Landscape land use designations in one or more timber sales over 5 to 10 years.
- Reconstruct 7 miles of temporary road.
- Maintain approximately 8 miles of National Forest System roads

Existing rock quarries would provide materials for road maintenance and reconstruction. Existing log transfer facilities at Thomas Bay would be used.

Preliminary Issues

Preliminary concerns identified by the interdisciplinary team include: (1) designing an economical timber sale(s), and (2) the effects of timber harvest and road construction on wildlife including habitat, travel corridors, and subsistence.

Public Involvement

I expect the Thomas Bay IDT to involve the public in the NEPA process, such as scoping and other public involvement opportunities, as appropriate. Scoping will help identify issues and determine the development of alternatives. I expect implementation of a robust communication plan and the encouragement of early, meaningful participation by the general public or any collaborative group. Please include all residents of Mitkof and Kupreanof islands, as well as Thomas Bay residents and users of this area, relevant state and federal agencies, Alaska Tribal Governments, Alaska Native organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in these efforts.

Analysis

The 2016 Forest Plan Amendment will be the primary source of management direction. Please remember that the 2016 Forest Plan Amendment FEIS tiers to both the 1997 Forest Plan Revision FEIS and the 2008 Forest Plan Amendment FEIS. Specialists need familiarity with the unamended sections of those older documents. Additionally, all specialists should review Chapter 5 of the 2016 Forest Plan to familiarize themselves with direction specific to young-growth management.

The IDT role is to ensure the environmental analysis covers the impacts, cumulative effects, and project design features necessary to ensure the harvest of timber resources is done in compliance with all existing laws and regulations pertaining to the management of the Tongass National Forest.

I expect team members to primarily “write to the EA” for a focused analysis, not creating separate specialist reports. Certain resources may need to create separate reports, such as a Biological Evaluation/Assessment for wildlife and botany, and an invasive species risk assessment.

Line Officer Involvement

Please include me in all interdisciplinary team meetings. I am prepared to listen and provide direction, as necessary, to keep the environmental analysis on track and on schedule. If there is any concern or debate about which issues/alternatives or effects to include in the analysis, I expect the team to bring them to the IDT leader, planning staff officer, and me for resolution.

There are several points in the analysis at which I want to be informed before the team moves to the next step. These include (but are not limited to) the review and approval of the

- Public involvement plan and public scoping letter,
- Issues to carry forward in the analysis,
- Alternatives developed for analysis,
- Draft analysis and project record prior to public notice and review,
- Decision document, and
- Content and dates for all public meetings and/or subsistence hearings.

Nature of Decision to be Made

Given the purpose and need of the project, the District Ranger will review alternatives, and consider the environmental consequences to make decisions about (1) whether to select the

proposed action or another alternative; (2) number of miles of NFS road maintenance, temporary road reconstruction, and road closure to include; (3) project design features and monitoring; and (4) whether there may be a significant restriction to subsistence resources.

Timeline

My goal is to sign a Decision Notice for this project by the 4th quarter of FY22.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ted Sandhofer". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

THEODORE SANDHOFER
District Ranger

cc: Clint Kolarich, Tom Parker, Tory Houser, Linda Slaght, Shelia Spores, Tom Heutte, Jason Anderson, Amanda Warner Thorpe, Lucy Aragon, April Dent, Michael Goldstein, Dawn Collinsworth