A PROPOSED STRATEGY FOR MAINTAINING WELL-DISTRIBUTED, VIABLE POPULATIONS OF WILDLIFE ASSOCIATED WITH OLD-GROWTH FORESTS IN SOUTHEAST ALASKA

Report of an
Interagency Committee

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steady-state forest condition (Alaback 1984). Although clearcut logging has affected a relatively small percentage of southeast Alaska, it has and will have significant impacts in the more productive areas of the Forest (e.g., Prince of Wales Island). Where logging does occur, it is typically concentrated in the rare, highly productive old-growth stands at low elevations. In general, these same stands are the most valuable for wildlife; their loss results in disproportionate impacts on certain species (Schoen et al. 1988). Fragmentation of landscapes has increased since industrial scale logging began in 1954 (Table 1). The amount of old-growth forest removed through logging since 1954 ranged from 0% to 25% on a province by province basis in 1991 (Table 2). Under Alternative P of the Revision of the Tongass National Forest Land Management Plan (1992 version) up to 71% of old-growth forest will be harvested in some provinces over the 150 year life of the plan.

Because a relatively small percentage of the landscape has been modified, land managers in southeast Alaska still have an opportunity to maintain biological diversity through application of the principles of conservation biology (e.g., Suring and Crocker-Bedford 1993) on a large geographic scale. However, if management actions are not taken soon to ensure the maintenance of biological diversity future management options will be foreclosed. Conservation of biological diversity includes, among other management considerations, specific actions to ensure that viable populations of all wildlife are maintained and are well distributed over the landscape (Keystone Center 1991). This document proposes management standards designed to maintain well-distributed, viable populations of vertebrate species associated with old-growth forests in southeast Alaska.

THE PROCESS

Background

Regulations were developed to implement the National Forest Management Act of 1976 on National Forests (USDA Forest Service 1982). These regulations direct the USDA Forest Service to provide wildlife habitats capable of maintaining viable populations of existing native and desired non-native vertebrate species

across the National Forests. A viable population is defined as "...one which has the estimated numbers and distribution of reproductive individuals to insure its continued existence is well distributed..." throughout a National Forest (USDA Forest Service 1982:43048). "Well distributed" has been defined "throughout the existing range of the subspecies" (USDA Forest Service 1984).

The regulations further state that "...habitat must be well distributed so that...individuals can interact with others..." on National Forests (USDA Forest Service 1982:43048). "Well distributed" is more specifically defined for the purposes of this document to mean that habitats are maintained so that a species has a high likelihood of occurring within each 10,000+ ac watershed within its current range. Precedence for this definition was set in the resolution of the appeal of the Flathead National Forest Land Management Plan in Montana.

An interagency committee was assembled in October 1990 by the Tongass Land Management Plan Revision Interdisciplinary Team. The charge to this committee was to develop and recommend management standards that provided a high likelihood of maintaining viable, well-distributed populations of old-growth associated wildlife species on the Tongass National Forest. This task was specifically limited to terrestrial vertebrate species directly associated with old-growth forests.

To accomplish this task the committee did the following:

1.) reviewed prior efforts to address species with viability or distribution concerns on the Tongass National Forest;

2.) identified species associated with old-growth forest communities that may have viability or distribution concerns either in the next 10 years or as a result of the cumulative impacts of proposed management actions over the long term (i.e., 100 yrs);

3.) documented the best information available on taxonomy, population status, demographics, and habitat relationships of identified species and the need for research to fill significant data gaps;