

Alaska Board of Forestry 2023 Annual Report to the Governor

A Review of the Alaska Forest Resources and Practices Act: Implementation and Effectiveness

April 2024

The Alaska Board of Forestry

The Board of Forestry provides a forum for forest practices issues and management of forests on state land. The Board monitors the implementation and effectiveness of the Forest Resources and Practices Act and reports its findings to the Legislature and Governor. Board members represent the following constituencies:

- ◆ Acting DNR State Forester, Norm McDonald, Acting Chair
- ◆ Native Corporations, Nathan Lojewski
- ◆ Professional Forester, Keith Coulter
- ◆ Recreation, John Rusyniak
- ◆ Fish & Wildlife Biologist, Bill Morris
- ◆ Timber Industry, Eric Nichols
- ◆ Commercial Fishing, Vacant
- ◆ Mining, Denise Herzog
- ◆ Environmental Org., Brian Kovol

**2023 Report from the Board of Forestry to the Governor on the Forest
Resources and Practices Act (FRPA)
April 2024**

The Board of Forestry is pleased to submit our annual report to the Governor regarding the Forest Resources and Practices Act (FRPA) and forest management issues in Alaska. This letter presents our recommendations on the following topics:

1. Generating jobs
 - Southeast Alaska timber
 - Interior Alaska timber
 - Response to USDA Forest Service NOI
 - Local lumber grading effort
 - Statewide timber industry support
 - Adding and retaining forestry staff
2. Wildfire and risk management
 - Hazardous fuels reduction
 - Increased firefighting capacity and training
3. Forest Practices Act Effectiveness
 - Minimizing environmental impact of timber harvest
 - Funding Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) field presence
 - FRPA effectiveness
 - Filling vacant Board of Forestry position: Commercial Fishing

GENERATING JOBS

The Board commends the Division of Forestry & Fire Protection (DOF) in their efforts to generate jobs for Alaskans, supporting the timber industry and protecting Alaskans from wildfire.

Southeast Alaska timber

As the U.S. Forest Service’s timber sales in the Tongass National Forest continue to decrease, the State is under increasing pressure to offer sales to maintain a timber supply for the local industry. DOF offers all the timber allowable under state statute with a small agency workforce in Southeast Alaska. As part of the Governor’s Timber Bridge program for the Southeast Alaskan industry, DOF has committed to selling 14 million board feet of timber per year as long as possible.

The Board recognizes that the U.S. Forest Service’s recent decrease in the number and volume of timber sales in the Tongass National Forest significantly limits the timber supply available to maintain a viable timber harvest industry in the region. The Board further encourages the State to work with the U.S. Forest Service to reverse this trend to generate job growth and promote economic activity in Southeast Alaska. Without an adequate timber supply, we risk losing our existing timber industry, the effects of which will be felt throughout Southeast Alaska.

Interior Alaska timber

The Northern Region continues to support local value-added wood processors, commercial fuelwood processors, long-term timber sales, and jobs in its timber sale program. DOF identifies

and offers timber for salvage that was damaged by insects, floods, fires, and windstorms. The sawlog demand remains stable while the firewood and biomass industry in Interior Alaska has increased slightly due to fluctuations in oil prices. The biomass mills in North Pole and Tok continue to produce wood pellets and pellet logs and distribute their products statewide.

Response to USDA Forest Service NOI Land Management Plan Direction for Old-Growth Forests

Recently, DOF was involved in developing comments for the State’s submission to the U.S. Forest Service on their Notice of Intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement on the “Land Management Plan Direction for Old-Growth Forest Conditions Across the National Forest System” (88 FR 88042). The NOI describes a proposal to amend 128 land management plans nationwide for units of the National Forest System. Among other things, the State requested the Forest Service exempt the Tongass and Chugach National Forests from the proposed land management plan amendment, or work with the State to craft a state-specific solution that will accommodate the unique characteristics and management situations in Southcentral and Southeast Alaska. The Forest Service is statutorily required by 16 U.S.C. §539d to “seek to provide a supply of timber from the Tongass National Forest which (1) meets the annual market demand for timber from such forest and (2) meets the market demand from such forest for each planning cycle.” It is unclear how the U.S. Forest Service could meet this statutory requirement while undertaking the proposed action, especially in light of recent simultaneous actions further reducing harvest.

The Board recommends DOF continue to track this proposal and provide input to the Forest Service.

Local lumber grading effort

Despite high demand for locally sourced dimensional lumber, many Alaskan sawmills cannot sell construction materials for housing. Building codes require lumber to be quality graded and stamped, and most Alaskan sawmills do not have the financial resources to pay for Lower 48 lumber grading companies to fly to Alaska to inspect their lumber. Most of the wood used for construction in Alaska is sourced from the Lower 48 or Canada. In 2023, DOF began working with stakeholders and legislators on a bill to allow for local lumber grading. This bill was signed into law in August 2023, and DOF immediately began building the program. This program will increase the use of Alaskan lumber in Alaskan markets by training local sawmill operators to self-certify their lumber. The Board supports efforts like this which aim to increase local value-added processing of Alaska timber products, generate jobs and economic activity, and create products that can reduce costs for Alaskan businesses and residents.

Statewide timber industry support

The Board recognizes the Governor’s interest in and efforts to revitalize the timber industry in Alaska and offers strong support for those efforts, while emphasizing the importance of preserving the water quality and fish habitat protections of the Alaska Forest Resources and Practices Act.

Adding staff

The Board appreciates the Governor’s support and the Legislature’s decision to fund additional forester and firefighter positions to replace some of those positions that were lost in budget cuts in 2016. During the field season of 2023, DOF was better staffed and able to have a greater field presence as compared to 2022.

With adequate staff, the Division will better be able to keep up with the industry's demand for timber statewide. In addition, these additional staff will help keep Alaskans safe from wildland fire while saving money that must otherwise be spent importing firefighters from the Lower 48 and fighting extended large fires that escaped initial attack. As with most state agencies, the Division has difficulty recruiting and retaining staff. The Board supports efforts to increase wages and benefits for staff so that Division jobs are more competitive.

WILDFIRE AND RISK MANAGEMENT

The Division's Forestry program and Fire Protection program remain functionally intertwined and complement each other. The two programs share staff, equipment and resources, resulting in significant efficiencies and cost savings. Heavy equipment that is used to suppress fires during the fire season is also used outside the fire season to build and maintain forest roads and implement hazardous fuels reduction projects and forest health projects. Staff retention is increased by allowing firefighters to transition out of fire suppression work to hazardous fuels reduction work in the fall and winter months.

Hazardous fuels reduction

Wildfire risks are steadily increasing in Alaska, with the wildfire season starting earlier and lasting longer than in the past. It is more important than ever to make sure that our communities are prepared for wildfire. The Division continues to work on hazardous fuels reduction projects and community planning for wildfire response with millions of federal dollars (augmented by state Capital Improvement Project funds) through several different grant sources.

FOREST PRACTICES ACT EFFECTIVENESS

Minimizing environmental impact of timber harvest

The Alaska Forest Resources and Practices Act (FRPA, AS 41.17) governs how commercial timber harvesting, reforestation, and timber access occur on state, private, and municipal land. The Act is designed to protect fish habitat and water quality and ensure prompt reforestation while providing for an economically viable timber industry.

The FRPA balances economic concerns for the timber industry with water quality and habitat protection needs. The FRPA framework provides certainty and credibility for landowners, operators, and the public, and establishes one-stop shopping for compliance with state and federal clean water standards. The FRPA does not issue a permit for activities but relies on commercial forest operator's submittal of a notice of activities via the detailed plan of operations (DPO). DNR is the lead agency and coordinates activities with ADF&G and DEC, and the agencies must act upon the DPO within 30 days. The FRPA depends on a suite of best management practices (BMPs), field inspections by state agency staff and proactive educational efforts to achieve compliance. When required, appropriate enforcement tools are provided by the Act to ensure resources are protected. The net effect of these steps is to create an efficient, practical approach to help timber and fishing industries continue to provide long-term jobs in support of communities throughout the state.

When properly implemented, FRPA helps the timber and fishing industries to operate profitably and efficiently while protecting fish habitat and water quality. Continued effectiveness depends on sufficient funding for the resource agencies to carry out their respective duties.

Funding DEC field presence

Because of reductions in funding allocations to the Department of Environmental Conservation's Division of Water (DOW), DOW staff have not been able to participate in field monitoring in

recent years. Alaska now lacks the field presence of one of the three key agencies responsible for ensuring compliance with and effectiveness of the Forest Practices Act. The Board of Forestry strongly recommends providing funding to support part of a water quality position to DOW, to allow DEC to once again participate in FRPA field monitoring. The collaboration among *all three* agencies helps ensure the successful continuation of the Alaska timber and fishing industries. This recommendation helps support a stronger Alaska economy. As mentioned above, the continuation of sustainable timber management practices adds value to Alaska timber and helps to sustain stream quality that supports our commercial and sport fish industries.

FRPA Effectiveness

The Board reviewed the 2023 reports from the departments of Fish and Game, Environmental Conservation, and Natural Resources, and the 2023 compliance monitoring results (see attached reports). Compliance monitoring showed that operators statewide have high rates of compliance and are implementing the FRPA BMPs properly. In all regions, the number of scoresheets completed and BMPs rated were considerably higher compared to 2022. Thanks to the Governor's and Legislature's support for replacing some forestry staff lost in 2016, DOF has hired four positions and had a stronger field presence in 2023.

All three agencies reported that FRPA was effective in 2023 (Region I: Southeast/coastal Alaska; Region II: Interior/South of the Alaska Range; and Region III: Northern/Copper River). Region I averaged 4.2 out of 5.0 on 529 rated BMPs with 89% of the BMPs scoring 4.0 or greater. Region II averaged 4.8 out of 5.0 on 15 rated BMPs with 100% of the BMPs scoring 4.0 or greater. Region III averaged 4.7 out of 5.0 on 239 rated BMPs with 94% of the BMPs scoring 4.0 or greater. In all regions, the number of scoresheets completed and BMPs rated was considerably higher compared to 2022.

The few BMPs in Region I that required corrective action were primarily related to road drainage, location of roads in riparian areas, and harvesting operations near surface waters. The operators acted quickly to rectify the deficiencies as they were discovered and made progress to fully implement the BMPs in future operations. There were no BMPs which scored below 4.0 in Region II. The BMPs which scored below 4.0 in region III were mainly related to harvest operations near surface waters.

DOF Area and regional staff provide training for landowners and operators that vary from formal classroom presentations to informal "tailgate" sessions during field inspections, to "teaching moments" during telephone conversations and DPO reviews. In 2023, two training sessions were held for DOF staff. If a problem arises, DNR focuses on operator training and makes sure that the issues are addressed. Enforcement authorities are part of the toolbox for ensuring that FRPA is implemented effectively. In 2023, DOF conducted 13 field inspections on private and other public (non-DNR) land and issued one charging document.

DEC listed no impaired waters under Section 303(d) of the Clean Water Act due to forestry activities on private and other public non-DNR lands regulated by FRPA.

Filling vacant Board of Forestry position

The Board is lacking a Commercial Fishing representative. Without the full suite of Board members, we cannot fully represent interests affected by timber harvest statewide. The Board encourages the Governor to fill the Commercial Fishing Seat as soon as possible.

CONCLUSION

The Board endorses the Alaska Forest Resources and Practices Act and its regulations as a practical and effective approach to protecting fish habitat and water quality, ensuring reforestation, and helping to support our state economy by maintaining sustainable timber and fishing industries. We remain committed to the principles of fairness, equitable distribution of costs, enforceability, and professional management upon which FRPA is based.

Sincerely,

Norm McDonald, Acting State Forester
Acting Chair, Alaska Board of Forestry

Alaska Board of Forestry

Nathan Lojewski, Alaska Native Corporations

Denise Herzog, Mining Organization

Brian Kovol, Environmental Organization

Bill Morris, Non-governmental Professional Fish/Wildlife Biologist

Eric Nichols, Forest Industry Trade Association

Keith Coulter, Non-governmental Professional Forester

John Rusyniak, Recreation Organization

Vacant, Commercial Fisherman's Organization

Attachments

- 2023 ADF&G Report to the Board of Forestry
- 2023 DEC Report to the Board of Forestry
- 2023 DNR Report to the Board of Forestry