

Alaska Board of Forestry 2021 Annual Report to the Governor

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

February 2022

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:

- ◆ DNR State Forester, Helge Eng, Chair
- ◆ Native Corporations, Nathan Lojewski
- ◆ Professional Forester, Mike Post
- ◆ Recreation, Russell Byerly
- ◆ Fish & Wildlife Biologist, Bill Morris
- ◆ Timber Industry, Eric Nichols
- ◆ Commercial Fishing, Vacant
- ◆ Mining, Denise Herzog
- ◆ Environmental Org., Brian Kovol

**2021 Report from the Board of Forestry to the Governor on the Forest
Resources and Practices Act (FRPA)
February 2022**

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 and being fiscally responsible
 - Southeast Alaska timber
 - Right-sizing forestry staff
 - Diversifying with partnerships between recreation and forestry
 - Cost-cutting efforts & increased public participation
 - Leveraging federal funds
2. Wildfire and risk management
 - Hazardous fuels reduction
 - Budget requests for increased fire staff and fire academy
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 AND BEING FISCALLY RESPONSIBLE

The Board commends the Division of Forestry (DOF) in their efforts to generate jobs for Alaskans while being fiscally responsible, despite market challenges outside their control.

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 with a small 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 for the next five years.

Adding forestry staff

The Board supports the Governor's budget inclusion of forester and firefighter positions to replace those that were lost in budget cuts in 2016. With adequate staff, the Division will 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.

Diversifying with partnerships between recreation and forestry

The Board commends DOF for completing the recreation improvements to the Rosie Creek forestry road system as a pilot partnership between forestry and recreation groups and agencies. DOF used Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) funds (administered by the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation through their Recreational Trails Program) to regrade an 18-mile

system of forestry roads, post the roads with directional signs and maps, and provide parking for the public by grading and clearing an inactive material site of junk cars.

This forestry/recreation initiative is intended to diversify and increase the types of activities on State Forest lands, taking advantage of the fact that recreation activities can benefit from appropriate use of timber management roads, and timber management can benefit from funding associated with recreation. An additional benefit is the chance to demonstrate to the public the positive impacts of responsible forest management, while supporting Alaska's timber program. A small timber sale is proposed in the Rosie Creek unit this winter, which will give foresters and recreationists an opportunity to coexist within the project area.

Cost-cutting efforts and greater public participation

In an effort to cut our own costs to the state budget, the Board of Forestry changed our practices from attending three in-person meetings a year to conducting two meetings by teleconference, and holding just one in-person meeting a year that incorporates a field visit to important sites in one of the three FRPA regions. For the last two years, due to COVID concerns, all our meetings were held via videoconference, and Board members participated remotely. While in-person meetings are always more impactful for the BOF, one advantage of this method was that DOF could widely advertise the videoconference login, and members of the public and other agencies could more easily call in and participate in the meetings.

Leveraging federal funds

The Board is pleased with the efforts of DOF, the Administration, and Legislature to take advantage of federal funds when possible, by using State funds as match for grants for work on fuel breaks, building forestry roads, providing recreation opportunities, and increasing positive exposure to the public about forestry.

Spending our funds wisely by leveraging state funds to receive many more federal dollars will continue to improve our ability to provide timber to support Alaskan timber companies, to protect our communities from wildfire, and by supporting recreational investments, give visitors more reasons to spend time and money in Alaska.

WILDFIRE AND RISK MANAGEMENT

Hazardous fuels reduction

Evidence shows that wildfire risks are steadily increasing in Alaska, with the wildfire season starting earlier and lasting later than in the past. It is more important than ever to make sure that our communities are prepared for wildfire. In 2020, for the first time, the Alaska Legislature appropriated funds for hazard fuel reduction efforts. Five million dollars was set aside for a multi-year capital budget to help create a more comprehensive and robust hazard fuel reduction program, including maintaining and creating fuel breaks, using the concept of firesheds¹, and working with communities and local government to ensure that **every** community in the boreal forest has an updated community wildfire protection plan (CWPP) and community response plan. Since 2020, the Legislature has allocated additional funds for fuels mitigation; the CIP funding now totals \$17 million.

In the last five years, DOF has completed the planning process for more than 5,000 acres of hazardous fuels reduction projects, and accomplished 1,600 acres of fuel reduction. These projects have so far used federal funds to hire fire crews and contractors. To responsibly

¹ Firesheds are lands around a community where wildfire ignitions could cause fires to spread into the community.

implement fuel reduction projects with new state funds in FY22, the Division's top priority is building capacity. DOF anticipates adding six positions initially, funded (fully or partially) through the CIP, with more positions possibly added in the near future. Private contractors will be utilized to accomplish fuel projects through both mechanical and contracted hand crews. An estimated \$6 million is projected for contract solicitation.

Budget requests for increased fire staff and fire academy

The Board of Forestry supports the Division's operating budget request for increased fire staff, both firefighters and support staff, to right-size the Division and make it more self-sufficient. Relying on out-of-state resources even during normal fire danger periods is 1) more expensive than hiring our own forces and 2) dangerous, since Outside resources are less available to come to Alaska, as fire seasons grow in length and intensity nationwide. The Board also supports the Division's request to rebuild its Wildland Fire Academy, which will provide job opportunities in rural communities and build capacity for firefighting statewide.

Proposed legislation to fund hazardous fuels work

Currently, state-employed emergency firefighter (EFF) crews may only be used in emergencies, which means that they may not be hired to work on fuel treatment projects. The Board supports the Division of Forestry in its work with the Administration and Legislature to try to remove this restriction, so state-employed EFF crews can be paid to work on vital fuel reduction projects during low fire years and in the off-season. This will both help reduce wildfire risks, and by extending work opportunities, help these crews remain intact and ready when needed. DOF staff will support Representative Cronk's HB 209, as well as the amendment contained in HB 98 to allow non-emergency funds to pay for EFF crew work.

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 creates an efficient, practical approach to help timber and fishing industries continue to provide long-term jobs in support of communities throughout the state.

The Forest Resources & Practices Act, when properly implemented, 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 2021 reports from the departments of Fish and Game, Environmental Conservation, and Natural Resources, and the 2021 compliance monitoring results (see attached reports). Compliance monitoring showed that operators statewide have high rates of compliance and are implementing the FRPA BMPs properly. Compliance monitoring scores are higher than last year in Region I, increased in Region II, and remained high in Region III.

All three agencies reported that FRPA was effective in 2021 in all three FRPA Regions (Region I: Southeast/coastal Alaska; Region II: Mat-Su/Southwest; Region III: Northern/Copper River). Region I compliance was high as 91% of all BMPs evaluated met or exceeded compliance standards, although there were individual BMPs which required corrective action. Those BMPs were related to road drainage, adequate number of drainage structures, grading bridges and locating roads in riparian areas. Operators acted quickly to rectify deficiencies as they were discovered. Active road maintenance and BMPs related to timber harvest were excellent.

One training session was held in Southeast for Yak Timber Inc. staff. Due to low harvest activity, only nine inspections were conducted in Region II, although that is an increase of eight over 2020. The activity was mostly winter logging and winter road construction. Full compliance occurred on all operations. Region III had excellent compliance results in 2021 at 93%. The Tanana Valley State Forest's road maintenance program has improved in recent years due to increased funding for equipment operators and improved efforts of timber sale contractors utilizing the TVSF existing mainlines. This road system receives a significant amount of public use, so attention to road maintenance and grading prior to freeze-up has been a priority in recent years. The Tanana River ice bridge crossing was successfully constructed, and compliance was exceptional on winter roads and most harvest operations in Region III.

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. DOF conducted 22 field inspections on private, municipal, and trust land this year, and issued just one notice of violation, in Yakutat. This enforcement action has not yet been completed.

Filling vacant Board of Forestry position

The Board is pleased that the vacant Recreation Seat was filled by Russell Byerly of Haines, but we are still 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,



Helge Eng, State Forester
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
Mike Post, Non-governmental Professional Forester
Russell Byerly, Recreation Organization
Vacant, Commercial Fisherman's Organization

Attachments

- 2021 ADFG Report to the Board of Forestry
- 2021 DEC Report to the Board of Forestry
- 2021 DNR Report to the Board of Forestry