



# USDA Forest Service

## Alaska Region



Special Report

May 2002

### **Alaska Natives, External Stakeholders Provide Feedback About Effectiveness of Forest Service Communication**

Through a series of and focus group sessions, employees, Alaska Natives and external stakeholder groups had a chance to tell us what they think about the effectiveness of the agency's communication in Alaska.

The purpose of this report is to provide feedback to the people who were invited to participate in the Communication Assessment. Even if you were not able to attend one of the focus groups, we wanted to share the results with everyone who was invited. In a nutshell, here's what we found out:

- Opinions vary about how effective the Forest Service is in communicating with the public. In many cases, people who have an interest in Forest Service issues said there is effective communication with the local offices. However, participants said the agency's communication with the general public is less effective.
- Many participants said they do not understand the overall goals of the agency or the decision-making process of the Forest Service.
- External stakeholders tend to trust the staff and Ranger in their local Districts. However, they have a lower level of trust in the Forest Service as an organization. They associate the Forest Service with bureaucracy, saying decisions are often either controlled or changed by Washington, DC.
- External stakeholders noted that changes in local staff members makes it difficult for the Forest Service to build and maintain relationships with local stakeholders.

#### **Background**

In November and December of 2001, the USDA Forest Service, Alaska Region assessed the effectiveness of its communication among several stakeholder groups: Forest Service management and employees, public interest groups, Alaska Natives and federal/state government agencies.

The Assessment consisted of a series of interviews with management and focus group sessions with employees and external groups. The Forest Service contracted with the research and planning firm of Joe Williams Communications, Inc. to conduct the interviews and focus group sessions.

#### **Purpose of Assessment**

- Evaluate the level of trust external audiences have in the Forest Service.
- Assess Forest Service communication strengths and weaknesses.
- Identify preferred methods of communication for different stakeholders.
- Evaluate specific communication and information needs.

#### **About the Process**

An external consultant, Joe Williams Communications, Inc., facilitated 16 focus group sessions with external stakeholders. A total of 59 people participated in the focus groups. In addition, 14 focus groups were held with Forest Service employees to evaluate internal communication. The external focus groups were held in these communities:

##### *Chugach:*

Anchorage  
Cordova  
Seward

##### *Tongass:*

Juneau Thorne Bay  
Ketchikan Yakutat  
Klawock Wrangell  
Sitka

#### **For More Information**

For more information, send a note to [r10\\_webmail@fs.fed.us](mailto:r10_webmail@fs.fed.us) or contact Pamela Finney in the Alaska Region Public Affairs Office, at (907) 586-8806.

<b>Audience</b>	<b>Key Strengths</b>	<b>Key Weaknesses</b>
<b>Public Interest Groups &amp; Government Agencies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive communication with local offices.</li> <li>• Public comment and feedback process.</li> <li>• Well-informed regarding issues in which they have an interest.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Level of trust in the agency overall.</li> <li>• Understanding of the Forest Service decision-making process.</li> <li>• Inconsistency about whether the Forest Service follows through with commitments.</li> <li>• Perception that actions at the local and Regional level are controlled by bureaucracy, politics and Washington, DC.</li> </ul>
<b>Alaska Natives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Memorandum of Understanding: Where written agreements are in place, Native representatives report higher trust and confidence in the agency.</li> <li>• Partnerships, working together. When Forest Service representatives have sought partnerships with Native groups, their working relationship has improved.</li> <li>• Willing participants. Alaska Natives said they want to have a positive relationship with the Forest Service, that they want to be partners and involved in the management of the forests.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of trust in the Forest Service.</li> <li>• Perception that there is a history of the Forest Service not consulting with Natives on projects that affect Alaska Natives.</li> <li>• Forest Service understanding of Native culture and structure.</li> <li>• Lack of a current contact list for Natives.</li> </ul>

## Four Key Themes Emerge From Communication Assessment

Throughout the focus group sessions, four key themes emerged across nearly all of the sessions. By addressing these issues, the Forest Service plans to improve its communication—and its relationship—with internal and external stakeholders. The four key themes are:

### 1. Relationships

The ability of District Rangers, District staff, Forest leadership and Regional leadership to build and maintain positive relationships with employees and external groups is vital to the success of the Forest Service.

### 2. Consistency

To be seen as credible and trustworthy, the Forest Service must be consistent in:

- The way it treats different groups of stakeholders.
- The way it implements policies and procedures throughout the Region.
- What it says it plans to do and what it actually does.
- How it manages the forests over time, despite changes in staffing and leadership. In other words, a district's policies and procedures should not vary significantly when new staff or district leadership is introduced.

### 3. Action

To gain stakeholder confidence, the Forest Service must be able to take action—to carry out its commitments. These actions should be timely, equitable to those involved and based on a sound decision-making process.

### 4. Effectiveness

The Forest Service must be effective in:

- The amount and quality of information that is disseminated internally and externally.
- Using simple terms to explain the reasons for all decisions, both external and internal (e.g., in addition to the NEPA process).
- Its ability to gather feedback from employees and external stakeholders.
- Selecting the appropriate channels for distributing information: e-mail, internet, face-to-face, print, etc.

# Analysis of Findings

The focus group sessions revealed a number of strengths and weaknesses. These are summarized below, broken out according to public interest groups/government agencies and Alaska Natives.

## Key Findings From Public Interest Groups / Government Agencies:

### Strengths:

- Public interest groups generally receive information about NEPA projects and have an opportunity to provide comments.
- Those who have an interest in specific projects say they feel informed about issues relating to those projects.
- Among the public interest groups, about half of the focus group sessions say they have positive communication with their local District Office.
- Among most of the sessions, people who use the forests regularly (e.g., for timber or recreation) say they are able to contact appropriate people within the agency when necessary. In addition, these stakeholders receive the information that is relevant to their interests, and they understand how to participate in the public input and feedback process. However, **they may not always understand how the decisions are made.**

### Weaknesses:

- There is uncertainty of how the Forest Service makes decisions based on public comment. Some say the agency looks primarily at the quantity of comments, and others say the agency favors more local input.
- Participants were divided about whether the Forest Service follows through with commitments: five focus groups say “yes,” four focus groups say “no.”
- Public interest groups tend to have a higher level of trust in individuals within the agency and a lower level of trust in the agency overall.
- Many in the public perceive that the Alaska Region is controlled by politics, bureaucracy and Washington. They cite instances when someone may state a position locally, and then the agency’s position changes, in their mind, due to Washington or the Regional Office. This can break down the credibility of people at the local level and erode trust.
- In seven of the nine public interest group sessions, participants say the Forest Service does not follow through with its communication to the public. In addition, many participants say they don’t feel that their opinions are heard by the agency, or that they have any influence in the agency’s decision-making process.

## WHAT PEOPLE SAID

**“The problem is, we don’t really know how decisions are made with public comments.”**



**“The local Ranger used to be more involved in the radio, advertising, and promotion of the forest usage. If they did more of this in the community, it would improve the image and people’s understanding.”**



**“The level of trust varies. On certain projects, they did what they said they would do. In other cases, the issues fade away and don’t get done. On some issues, there’s a policy shift that causes a change in the decision. It’s hard to have follow-through when you have changes in the administration and mixed messages.”**

**“The Forest Services forgets how to make decisions. Instead, they try to get through consensus and collaboration, which leads to delay, delay, delay... They need to have people sit down and discuss the issues. You don’t have to have everyone at the table agree. You can’t let consensus and collaboration drag on forever. People who use the forest and make a living off it just give up after a while.”**

## Key Findings From Alaska Natives:

Comments from Alaska Native groups vary widely from one session to the next. In some sessions, participants had a generally positive attitude, and described a positive climate. However, these groups also expressed concerns and were cautious about their level of trust and confidence in the Forest Service. In other sessions, participants were more vocal when expressing concerns about their relationship with the Forest Service and described a number of negative experiences.

The only overall pattern across the Alaska Native focus group sessions is that their experiences in working with the Forest Service are affected most by the extent to which the local Forest Service representatives make an effort to reach out and partner with the tribes.

Two concerns should be raised about the research results:

1. In three of the eight communities in which we had scheduled sessions, no one attended.
2. With the exception of Ketchikan, only 2–4 people per session attended the Native focus groups. This low turnout raises concerns over why people chose not to attend. There may be issues that we were not able to capture because of the low attendance, in which case our results may not be truly representative of the Native groups.

With this caution in mind, the key strengths and weaknesses identified by the Alaska Native focus group sessions are:

### Strengths:

- Memorandum of Understanding: Where written agreements are in place, Alaska Native representatives report higher trust and confidence in the agency.
- Partnerships, working together: When Forest Service representatives have sought partnerships with Alaska Native groups, their working relationship has improved.
- Willing participants: Alaska Natives say they want to have a positive relationship with the Forest Service—that they want to be partners and to be involved in the management of the forests.

### Weaknesses:

- There is a lack of trust in the Forest Service among some of the Alaska Native groups. One group was particularly concerned about what the Forest Service would do with the results of the focus groups. Their main concern was that the Forest Service would make a decision on a project and use the focus groups to say that it had “consulted with the Natives on the issue.”
- Participants cite a history of not being consulted with on Forest Service decisions that impact Native lands or populations. This history contributes to a breakdown in the level of trust and confidence in the agency.
- Alaska Native participants say the Forest Service does not adequately understand Native culture and how Native organizations are structured.
- In one of the sessions, participants say they have told the Forest Service all of this information in the past. They are frustrated that the agency keeps coming to Natives with same questions, and not seeing any changes.
- The Forest Service does not have an accurate list of contacts within Alaska Native organizations.

## WHAT PEOPLE SAID

**“It’s ‘us vs. them’ between the tribes and the Forest Service. There is a mistrust that has been going on forever.”**



**“The Forest Service has been reaching out to the tribes. They have met with the tribal leaders each month for the past 5–6 years. We discuss issues and concerns. There’s a better understanding of each other. . . It helps build trust and understanding.”**



**“I’m a little hesitant right now of conveying my feelings because I feel like there’s a plan to turn this around and say that you’ve consulted with the Natives on a particular project.”**

# USFS Develops Initiatives in Response to Input

## Taking Action Is The Key To Success

The results of the Communication Assessment have been presented to the Regional Leadership Team, which consists of the Regional Forester and other senior leadership in the Alaska Region. In addition, leadership teams and Rangers on the Tongass and Chugach National Forests have received the results of this Assessment.

In response to the input received from employees and external stakeholders, the Alaska Region is currently developing a set of strategic initiatives to help improve the agency's internal and external communication in the following areas:

1. Developing and maintaining positive relationships with external stakeholders.
2. More effectively explaining the reasons behind decisions.
3. Improving the use of e-mail and other electronic communication. (This is primarily an internal initiative.)
4. Improving the flow of information to and from external stakeholders and employees.

We recognize that in order for any initiative to be successful, it must have the input and support of those who will be responsible for carrying it out. We are currently involving various groups of employees to help us, such as District Rangers, field staff, front line staff, Supervisors Office employees and Regional Office employees.

While many of our initiatives may address ways we can improve internally, our ultimate goal is to create positive changes in how we interact with local interest groups, other government agencies and Alaska Natives.

## Five Things You Can Do Right Now

Here at the Forest Service, we're taking steps to improve our communication with external stakeholders. While we're working on these improvements, we'd like to offer some suggestions that you can follow to help make your next interaction with the Forest Service a positive experience:

1. Contact your local District Office first. Often times, we receive inquiries at the Regional Office that are better handled at the District Office level. If you have a question or concern, try contacting your District Ranger first. Then, if you're not successful, give us a call at the Regional Office. Refer to the list of District Offices and phone numbers on the back of this report for more information.
2. Check out our web site. There is a wealth of information available on our web site ([www.fs.fed.us/r10](http://www.fs.fed.us/r10)). The Forests have their own web sites, accessible through the Forest Service site. Plus, the web site changes frequently, so be sure to check back every now and then for new information.
3. Opportunities for involvement. Have an idea for how the Forest Service can be more involved in your community? Let us know! Whether it's talking to a class of 1<sup>st</sup> graders or giving a tour of the Forest, we're available to help. Call your local Ranger with your ideas.
4. Let us know how we're doing. Fill out a comment card (available on our internet) or just send us a note to give us some feedback. While we'd love to hear the positive things, we also want to know where we can improve!
5. If you're a member of an Alaska Native tribe or organization, keep us informed of events and activities in your organization. We'd like to strengthen our relationship with Alaska Natives, so if there are opportunities for the Forest Service to be more involved with your group (such as attending meetings, partnering on projects, and so forth), please contact your local District Ranger or the Regional Office.

## Questions & Comments

If you have any questions or comments about the Communication Assessment or this report, please contact Pamela Finney in Public Affairs, (907) 586-8806, or [r10\\_webmail@fs.fed.us](mailto:r10_webmail@fs.fed.us).

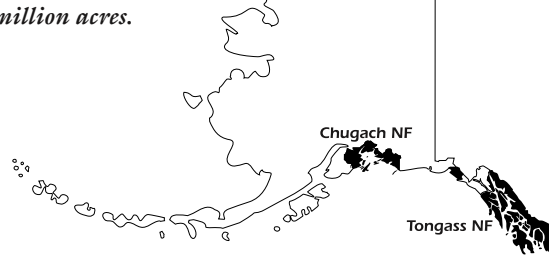
# USDA Forest Service, Alaska Region

## REGIONAL INFORMATION

Alaska Regional Office  
P.O. Box 21628  
Juneau, AK 99802-1628  
Regional Forester: Denny Bschor  
907-586-8806  
**Web Site:** [www.fs.fed.us](http://www.fs.fed.us)  
**E-Mail:** [r10\\_webmail@fs.fed.us](mailto:r10_webmail@fs.fed.us)



*The two largest National Forests in the nation are in Alaska—the Tongass and the Chugach. Combined, they make up more than 23 million acres.*



## Tongass National Forest

### Supervisor's Office:

648 Mission Street (Federal Building)  
Ketchikan, AK 99901-6591  
Forest Supervisor: Tom Puchlerz  
Deputy: Fred Salinas  
907-228-6202 • TTY: 907-228-6222  
E-Mail: [mjjones@fs.fed.us](mailto:mjjones@fs.fed.us)

### District Offices:

Craig Ranger District  
District Ranger: Dale Kanen  
Phone: 907-826-3271  
  
Hoonah Ranger District  
District Ranger: Paul Matter  
Phone: 907-945-3631  
  
Juneau Ranger District  
District Ranger: Pete Griffin  
Phone: 907-586-8800 • TTY: 907-790-7444

Ketchikan Ranger District  
District Ranger: Jerry Ingersoll  
Phone: 907-225-2148 • TTY: 907-225-0414

Petersburg Ranger District  
District Ranger: Patricia Grantham  
Phone: 907-772-3871 • TTY: 907-772-4636

Sitka Ranger District  
District Ranger: Carol Goularte  
Phone: 907-747-4220 • TTY: 907-747-4347

Thorne Bay Ranger District  
District Ranger: Dave Schmid  
Phone: 907-828-3304

Wrangell Ranger District  
District Ranger: Chip Weber  
Phone: 907-874-2323

Yakutat Ranger District  
District Ranger: Patricia O'Connor  
Phone: 907-784-3359

## Chugach National Forest

### Supervisor's Office:

3301 C Street, Suite 300  
Anchorage, AK 99503-3998  
Forest Supervisor: Dave Gibbons  
907-271-2500  
E-Mail: [mailroom\\_r10\\_chugach@fs.fed.us](mailto:mailroom_r10_chugach@fs.fed.us)

### District Offices:

Cordova Ranger District  
District Ranger: Rebecca Nourse  
907-424-7661

Glacier Ranger District  
District Ranger: Jim Fincher  
907-783-3242

Seward Ranger District  
District Ranger: Michael Kania  
907-224-3374