



United States Department of Agriculture

Tongass National Forest Sustainable Cabin Strategy



Anan Bay Cabin



Forest Service
Alaska Region

Tongass National Forest

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TONGASS NATIONAL FOREST Sustainable Cabin Strategy

1. Vision and Strategy
2. What Success Means
3. Core Objectives
4. Objective 1: Cabin Site Design & Planning
5. Objective 2: New Cabin Site Recommended Criteria
6. Objective 3: Cabin Relocation
7. Objective 4: Cabin Decommission
8. Objective 5: Cabin program monitoring & evaluation
9. Past Action and Evaluations
 - Background
13. Current Situation (2018 - Present)
14. Public Feedback
15. What is Sustainable?
 - Soft Values
16. Strategy Considerations—No One Standard
17. Where we go from Here

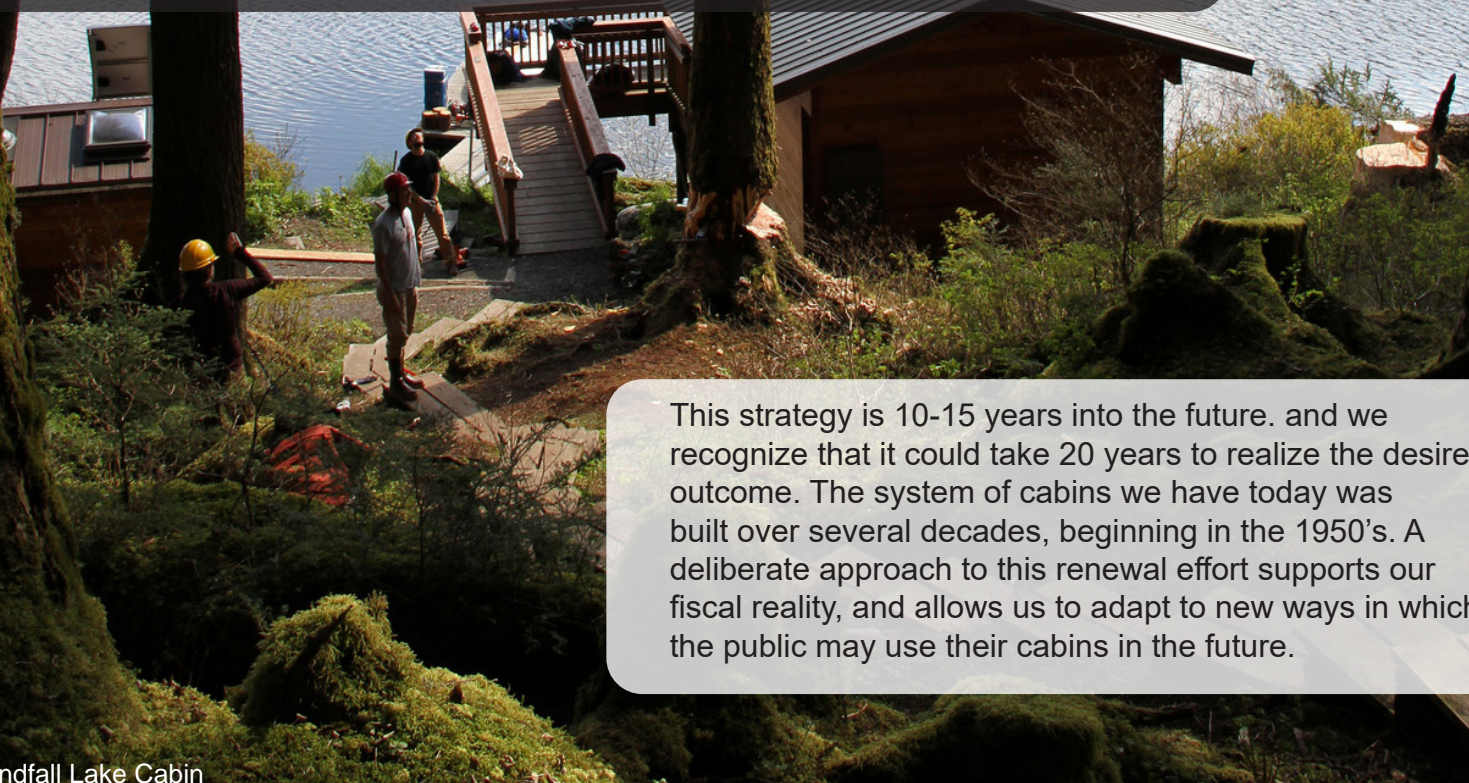


Our Vision and Strategy

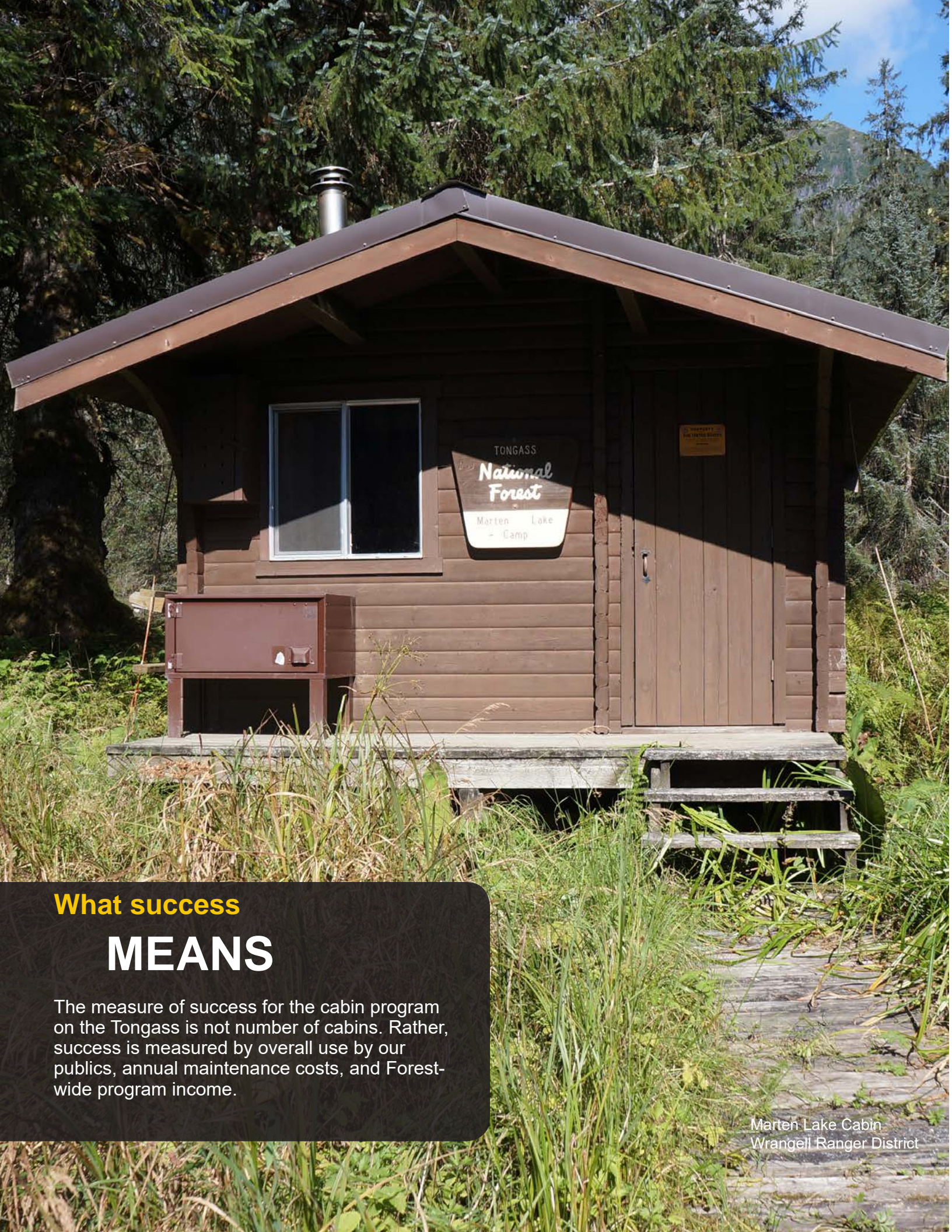
We're going to build, relocate, and remove cabins in order to increase public access and use, while reducing costs and avoiding the addition of deferred maintenance on the cabin system.

This strategic plan seeks to:

- Identify specific actions and key criteria that will be used to right-size and update the system of 144 public-use recreation cabins on the Forest
- Meet contemporary public demands for cabins while living within today's management situation of increasing costs and reduced workforce, by defining the conditions and criteria that will be used to evaluate cabin management actions on the Tongass



This strategy is 10-15 years into the future, and we recognize that it could take 20 years to realize the desired outcome. The system of cabins we have today was built over several decades, beginning in the 1950's. A deliberate approach to this renewal effort supports our fiscal reality, and allows us to adapt to new ways in which the public may use their cabins in the future.



What success

MEANS

The measure of success for the cabin program on the Tongass is not number of cabins. Rather, success is measured by overall use by our publics, annual maintenance costs, and Forest-wide program income.

Marten Lake Cabin
Wrangell Ranger District



Core OBJECTIVES

Patching Lake Cabin
Ketchikan Misty Fjords Ranger District

- Patching Lake Cabin Site Design & Planning: Complete the design and planning processes to make cabin sites “shovel ready” for relocation, removal and/or construction; as opportunity and funding allows.
- New Cabin Site Recommended Criteria: New Cabin locations should meet the majority of features established in this strategy, while considering comparable cabin uses and overall cost projections.
- Cabin Relocation: A design and planning team will evaluate cabins identified for decommission to determine the financial effectiveness of relocation to new, more suitable areas.
- Cabin Decommission: The Forest must identify a tier of cabins that are ripe for decommission by evaluating which cabins no longer serve the public to a reasonable level of use, when compared to the operational costs.
- Cabin program monitoring & evaluation: With the goal of increasing visitation and decreasing maintenance costs across the Tongass, annual evaluation of this strategy will be key to demonstrating success.



Objective 1

Cabin Site Design & Planning

We will complete the design and planning processes to make cabin sites “shovel ready” for relocation, removal and/or construction as opportunity and funding allows through these actions:

- Evaluate and document 5-10 existing cabins per year, making a recommendation for each cabin as a part of this strategy.
- Determine the need for Developed Recreation Site Master Plans and/or NEPA to support new cabin sites.
- Establish a team to complete the planning and design for potential relocation, removal and/or construction actions on 2-3 cabins on each district per year.
- Implement renovation, relocation, removal or construction of approximately 2-3 cabins per district for the life of this strategy.



Situk Lake Cabin
Yakutat Ranger District



Eagle Glacier Cabin
Juneau Ranger District



Objective 2

New Cabin Site Recommended Criteria

- New Cabin locations considered should meet the following features and consider comparable cabin uses and overall cost projections. Cabin locations that do not meet a majority of these features should not be considered:
- Located on the road system or protected marine waters close to a public boat launch (Log Transfer Facility, Marine Access Facility, etc).
- Located on or near other recreational amenities (hiking trails, campgrounds, fishing/ hunting areas, watersports, subsistence resources, etc.)
- Proximal to a community; with more preference given to larger nearby population areas.
- Replaces one or more cabins that have low reported use due to presently unfavorable location.
- Projected annual maintenance costs less than the average annual maintenance cost of the unit's three highest use cabins.
- Near other special features not listed (geothermal features, glaciers, unique natural resource settings, etc.).

New cabin site actions:

- Construct and/or relocate up to 30 cabins over the life of this strategy, considering the above criteria.
- Focus new cabins in locations that will attract high numbers of use.



Florence Lake (East) Cabin
Admiralty Island National Monument



Tower's Arm Cabin
Petersburg Ranger District



Objective 3

Cabin Relocation

The design and planning team will also evaluate cabins identified for decommission to determine the financial effectiveness of relocation to new, more suitable areas. This evaluation would seek to meet user expectations at new sites in the most cost effective manner.

Relocation Actions:

- Evaluate financial feasibility for relocating cabins recommended for removal as well as low use cabins.
- Focus new cabins in locations that meet new cabin site criteria above, and will attract high use with low maintenance costs.



Raven Cabin
Yakutat Ranger District



Big Shaheen Cabin
Admiralty Island National Monument



Objective 4

Cabin Decommission

The Forest must identify a tier of cabins that are ripe for decommission by evaluating which cabins no longer serve the public to a reasonable level of use when compared to the operational costs. This will include some or all of the following ideas:

- o *Average nights of reported use, less than 30 days:* This is based on the professional judgement of recreation managers at the Forest and District Level.
 - There are 39 Cabins currently on the Forest receiving less than 30-days use each year. While this number does not automatically indicate a lack of adequate public use to justify continued maintenance costs, further exploration of these 39 sites data shows the following;
 - 26 must be accessed by flight (high cost to user and manager)
 - 25 are greater than 50 years old
 - 21 are within Wilderness Areas
 - o *Per ANILCA Section 1315 (c) the Secretary of Agriculture must notify congress of the intention to remove from Wilderness an existing public use cabin or shelter.*
- o *Deferred maintenance value:* A cabin with a high deferred maintenance value and low use may be ripe for removal or relocation.
- o *Conditional removal:* Once a decision is reached on specific cabins to be removed/relocated, time will be allocated for the public to respond. For example, if low use and deferred maintenance are the primary factors leading to a proposed removal, increased public use and the emergence of partner interest may prevent the need for closure.

Decommission Actions:

- Decommission underutilized cabins considering above guidance
- Develop and foster partnerships to assist in lowering deferred. maintenance or operations costs, where underutilized cabins have high community value but low use.



Shiple Bay Cabin
Thorne Bay Ranger District



Objective 5

Cabin program monitoring & evaluation

With the goal of increasing visitation and decreasing maintenance costs across the Tongass, annual evaluation of this strategy will be key to demonstrating success. Similar to a standard business plan there is a continued need to monitor use, income, and costs, as well as anticipate changes.

- Monitoring & Evaluation Actions:
- Complete a Recreation Site Analysis for the Forest in 2020.
- From completed RSA, develop a baseline for deferred maintenance; average use per year, per site; average site maintenance costs; and other metrics

- Continue to monitor cabin use, income, and costs at the Forest and District level
- Use this information to anticipate trends at the Forest and District level
- Consider these trends and respond to emerging recreational use patterns in relation to this cabin strategy and the Tongass' recreation program as a whole



Raven Cabin trail
Yakutat Ranger District



Past

Action

and

Evaluations

A summary of past and current efforts, trends and observations related to the Tongass National Forest system of public use recreation cabins. These past efforts have contributed greatly to the development of the Tongass National Forest Sustainable Cabin Strategy, and its associated recommendations.



Background

The Tongass National Forest maintains 144 public use cabins across southeast Alaska. Tongass cabins are enjoyed predominantly by Alaska residents, and visitors to a lesser extent. Cabin settings range from developed recreation sites to remote wilderness locations. The most popular cabins offer a variety of user experiences such as hunting and fishing, saltwater access, winter sports, and/or other unique or scenic recreational opportunities.

Changing demographics over the past 20 years have presented a challenge to agency recreation managers for maintaining these cabins into the future. As road systems on islands have been expanded and enhanced, cabin use at road-based facilities has increased, despite few cabins being

located on road systems. Conversely, the majority of cabins are located in places where airplane access is required and the number of air-service providers has dwindled in many of the smaller communities. These changes in user preferences and socio-economic conditions have made remote cabins more costly to access for users, and more expensive to maintain for the agency; while increasing demand on those cabins which meet contemporary user interests.

The preceding observations, and the overall age of the Tongass cabins has been the source of ongoing concern for recreation managers for many years. The Forest Service has sought to understand and summarize the situation through numerous efforts over the past fourteen years.



Sitkoh Lake West Cabin
Sitka Ranger District



2005: Recreation Site Facilities Master Planning: A process undertaken to identify program priorities; reduce deferred maintenance by 20% per year; and to manage Forest Service facilities to acceptable standards with the available funding. Several options were identified to help alleviate the overall problem and they included: raising cabin fees, allowing outfitters and guides to rent lower use cabins, using donated funds/labor to help, allowing groups or individuals to adopt cabins, decommissioning.

Ranger Districts held community meetings circa 2007/2008 regarding this effort and received generally negative feedback about the potential to close cabins. Despite cabins having little or no reported use, or having substantial deferred maintenance values, public sentiment over individual cabins demonstrated a strong user-attachment and shed light on the gap between reported/measurable use and that use which goes unreported (and unpaid).

2007: Tongass National Forest Public Use Cabins Rental Fee Market Survey: A certified Forest Service Appraiser's evaluation of USFS Cabin rental fees. This document provided an overview of comparable rental fees by other large rural land owners in Alaska (State of AK, BLM and NPS) and provided commentary on various aspects of the USFS Cabin Rental fee structure and price points.

2008: Tongass begins process of reviewing recreation cabin fees and makes recommendations to the Regional Office for possible fee increases.

2009: Deferred Maintenance: The Tongass worked on deferred maintenance for 24 recreation cabins and completely replaced two recreation cabins.

2012: Public Use Recreation Cabin Program Financial Sustainability Strategy-Tongass National Forest: Commissioned by the Regional Office and produced by a private sector firm, Capitol Hotel Management. The report does a thorough job of evaluating the Tongass Cabin system, including occupancy trends, district management costs and market rates. It compares the Tongass cabin system to that of the State of AK, Chugach National Forest and other cabin systems in the US, and other countries. The report makes 14 recommendations focused on Facility Management, Revenue Generation, and Cost Management.

Several of these recommendations have been acted upon by the Tongass. Other recommendations may still be relevant to consider.

2013: Environmental Assessment - Tongass National Forest Sustainable Cabin Management: This project was proposed to address management action on 11 specific cabins in the system. The decision made was to decommission 10 of the 11 cabins. All 10 have since been removed from the Tongass. Number 11 was Checats cabin, with a plan to monitor use and decommission if use did not improve.



Josephine Lake Cabin
Thorne Bay Ranger District

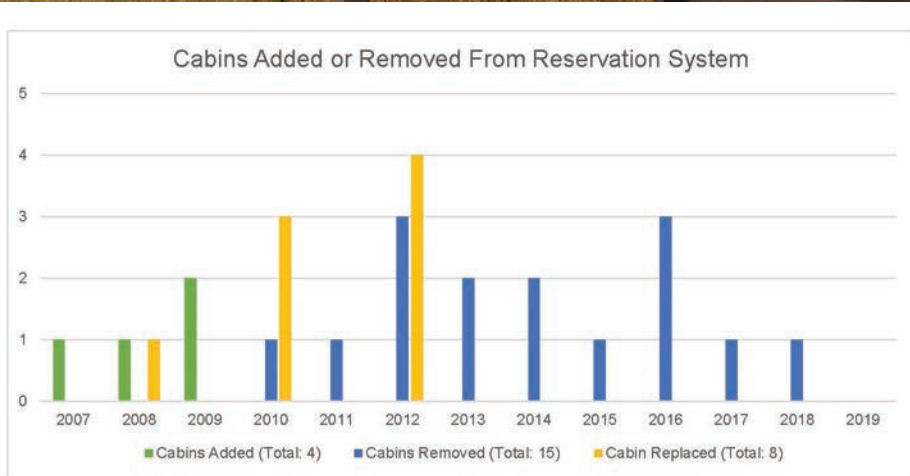
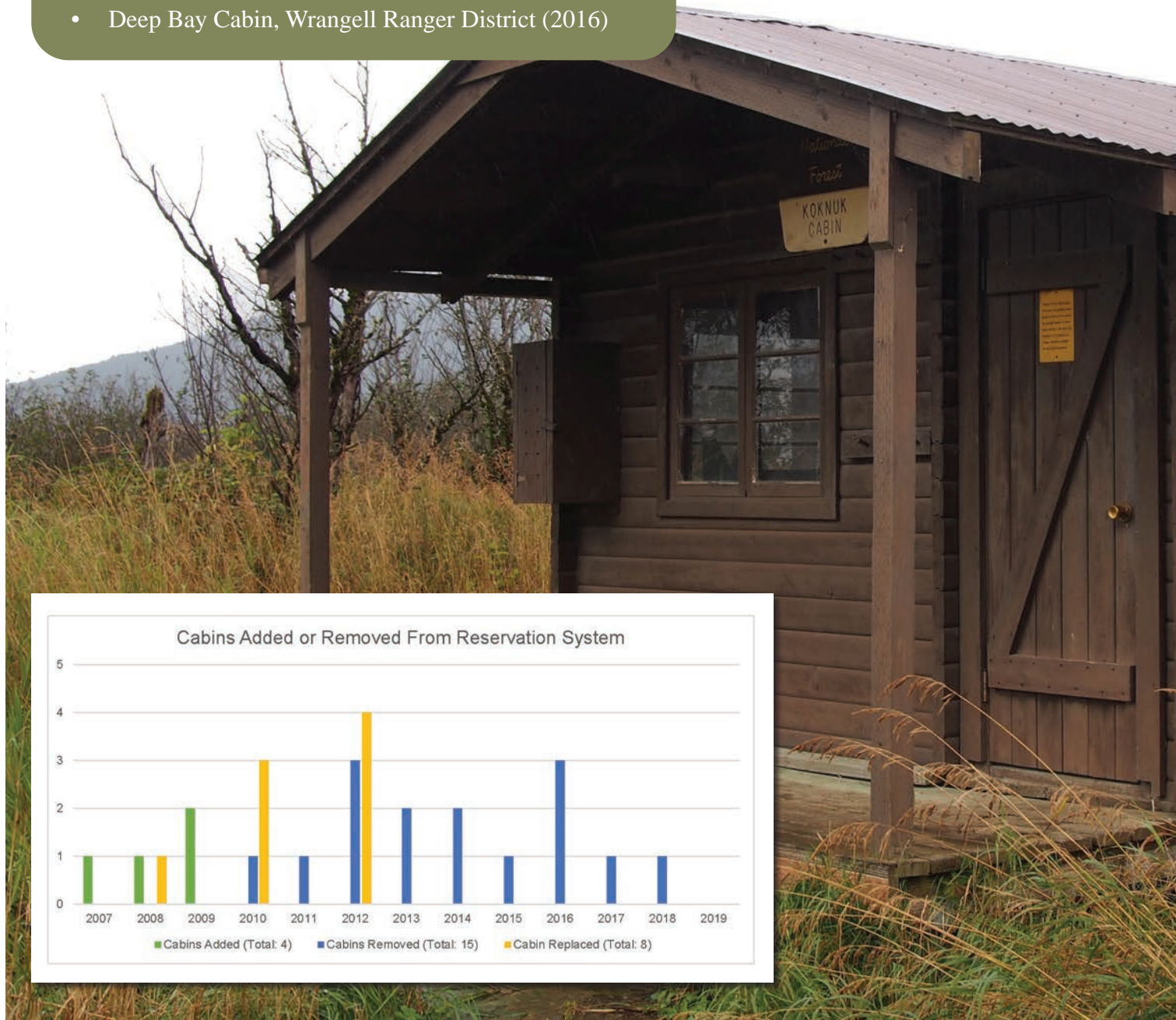
2014: Potential Concession Efforts: As agency managers continued to witness the same changes in user demographics, budget reductions and increasing maintenance costs; Forest leadership discussed efforts to consider Public-Private partnerships known as Concessions.

2015: Recreation Facilities Analysis: The Tongass completed a formal Recreation Facilities Analysis in 2015 and has since used that information in its budget formulation process for recreation management. The information suggests a specific financial capacity line under which recreation facilities (cabins, campground, etc.) should be considered for closure, removal or decommission, though it does not direct such actions.



While the majority of these preceding efforts sought to address challenges to the existing system of public use cabins on the Forest, reduce the fiscal burden of that system, and evaluate fees associated with the existing cabin system - it should be noted that several new cabins were constructed and/or added to the reservation system during this same period. All of these cabins meet the criteria for new cabins identified earlier in this document and are very popular with cabin users, with a few being some of the highest use cabins on their respective district.


- 12-mile Cabin, Craig Ranger District (2007)
- Starrigavan Cabin, Sitka Ranger District (2008)
- Middle Ridge Cabin, Wrangell Ranger District (2009)
- 8-Fathom Cabin, Hoonah Ranger District (2009)
- Kennel Creek Cabin, Hoonah Ranger District (2012)
- White Sulphur Springs, Sitka Ranger District (2013)
- Polk Inlet Cabin, Craig Ranger District (2014)
- Deep Bay Cabin, Wrangell Ranger District (2016)





Current Situation

(2018-Present)



Managers remain concerned about their ability to address the cabin program. Identified concerns include but are not limited to;

- Rising construction costs for deferred maintenance items and/or new cabins
- Decreasing funding and the associated reduction of workforce
- Loss of skills in the workforce
- Lack of success in securing cost-effective contract services for cabin maintenance
- No previous long-term strategy

In response, the Tongass began another review of its Cabin program. This review assumed that in response to the challenges of today, agency leadership believes it is time to redistribute the system of cabins on the Tongass to locations that are aligned with the current socio-economic realities of southeast Alaska. This means *moving the system we have toward the system the public wants...* and it will require cabin closures; cabin relocations and sound recreation planning for future cabin construction in preferred locations.

The review considered:

- Contemporary and historic concerns about financial capability to maintain the existing cabin system;
- Numbers, age and geographic distribution of cabins in the system;
- Shifting user-preferences;
- Changes in local socioeconomic conditions;
- Limited buying power of agency funds, and
- Social values attached to the cabins

Public Feedback

Recognizing public concern about cabin closures (even at cabins which have very low use), the Tongass reached out through social media to further refresh its perspective of contemporary public interest. The Forest received feedback through a cabin related social media group consisting of more than 500 regional cabins users, which confirmed the following:

- Hike-in and Boat-in cabins are most popular by comment, but Drive-in are as well. Almost no one spoke of fly-in as a choice.
- Wilderness/Solitude, Scenic Views and Hiking were the most prominent features highlighted by the poll.
- Wood stove is overwhelmingly preferred to Kerosene.
- Poll shows people are uneasy about the concept of letting businesses utilize low-use cabins and want to know more about restrictions that could be in place to ensure private individuals have preference.
- Multiple comments show interest in an Adopt-a-cabin program or forming/partnering of a non-profit entity to support cabin maintenance.
- Multiple comments show the perception that the Tongass does not advertise their cabins well enough for them to be utilized.



What is Sustainable?

In July 2018, Tongass Leadership defined *sustainable* for the purpose of this Cabin Strategy – which generally means

- *Tongass cabins will incur no additional deferred maintenance values into the future.*
- *Deferred maintenance will be measured over the entire system of cabins, not individually.*

The purpose of using this baseline for sustainability is to ensure that management actions moving forward recognize the financial sustainability of the cabin program. Financial sustainability is also an important factor when considering the development of new cabins, so that future costs do not outpace maintenance capacity (funding and personnel).



Beecher Pass Cabin
Petersburg Ranger District



Plenty Cutthroat Cabin
Ketchikan Misty Fjords Ranger District



Kathleen Lake Cabin
Admiralty Island National Monument

Soft Values

Another important aspect of the Strategy was the goal of incorporating *soft values* that are not found in USFS data systems. All previous public efforts related to cabins have emphasized a variety of these *soft values* which users and managers attach to cabins. Values such as safety/safe harbor for stranded boaters; unique resource attractions specific to a given cabin; local community values driven by historic uses of a specific cabin; the recreational niche a particular cabin or style of cabin fulfills on a given Ranger District. These *soft values* have routinely confounded simple, finance-based decision making and will continue to do so into the future.

Strategy Considerations –

No One Standard

From July – December 2018, a small team of Tongass personnel consisting of Recreation Managers from the Forest and District, Public Affairs Staff and Line Officers continued to work on the Sustainable Cabin Strategy. This group worked to compare both the hard metrics available through agency systems like infrastructure database (INFRA), recreation facility analysis (RFA), etc. - and the available *soft values* gathered by Districts over the preceding efforts and through public discourse. The complexity of this socio-economic analysis became unwieldy despite a general agreement that both kinds of values contribute to informed decision making. However, the attempt to meld these soft and hard values yielded some important considerations:



Swan Lake Cabin
Petersburg Ranger District



Denver Caboose Cabin
Juneau Ranger District

1. No single measure works for all cabins/districts:
 - a. Metrics such as “nights of use per year” are easy to defer to for decision making purposes. However, the island archipelago setting of SE Alaska communities creates a significant liability to this metric; by dramatically handicapping smaller communities.
 - b. The observation and public feedback about fly-in cabins and their associated expense being outside contemporary interests, belies specific observations on some Districts where some fly-in cabins are still popular

2. Location and Access are critical factors for managers and users:
 - a. With the apparent increase in prices for flight services and the loss of local air service providers, once-popular fly in cabins generally are seeing less use and increased maintenance costs
 - b. Cabins recently built in areas accessible by automobile / foot are showing positive (growing) user trends.
 - c. Cabins on protected waters, close to communities or road-accessible marine access facilities are also showing stable user trends.
 - d. District maintenance costs are not well represented in agency systems or when considering “Forest-wide” averages.
 - e. District costs per cabin can vary widely based on location of cabin and specific cabin attributes (heat source, tidal influence, etc.)

3. A Forest-wide system is still managed at the District level. Each District must be able to justify the cabins they maintain within their fiscal capacity consistent with a financially-sustainable management goal

Where *we go* from Here

Over the next 10-15 years, we will endeavor to increase public access and use of Tongass recreation facilities, while reducing costs to maintain the program. With the help of our communities, we can make sure the Tongass has a sustainable cabin program that meets contemporary public demands over the long term. We will be taking a deliberate approach in this effort, in order to work within our fiscal reality while remaining adaptive to new ways in which the public may use their cabins in the future.

So, what happens next?

We will begin by establishing a design and planning team on the Forest to support findings by our District Rangers, and completing a Recreation Site Analysis for 2020. Every year, our Rangers will evaluate and document 5-10 existing cabins (forest-wide), making a recommendation for each. Based on these local evaluations, which will include community input, the Tongass will construct and/or relocate up to 30 cabins over the life of this strategy. These evaluations will also determine which cabins no longer serve the public to a reasonable level of use, and should be decommissioned.

Throughout this process, the Tongass will be regularly evaluating and checking in on this strategy to ensure leadership is responsive to emerging recreational use patterns.

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