January 5, 2015

Greetings,

Enclosed is information on the proposed Improvements for Neck Lake and El Capitan Cave Roads (NLECC) that are being planned under authorization of the Predecisional Administrative Review Process [Objection Process] (36 CFR 218). The National Forest System Roads (NFSRs) included in this project are: 1500000, 2000000, 2500000, 3000000, and 3065000.

During the development and preparation of the project, participation of interested persons, state and local governments, and tribes is encouraged – both at this time and throughout the process.

The Improvements for NLECC Roads Environmental Assessment (EA) and draft decision will be completed and mailed to those who have submitted comments, and to those who have requested to be included on the project mailing list. Mailing of a copy of the final environmental analysis and draft decision is planned for the summer of 2015.

The project implements the Tongass National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) is subject to 36 CFR 218.7 parts (a) and (b). The EA and draft decision will be mailed to those who have commented during the process (36 CFR 218). Instead of an appeal period, there will be an objection process before the final decision is made. In order to be eligible to file an objection, an individual or organization must submit specific written comments related to the project during scoping or any other periods where public comment is specifically requested on this project (218.5). Individual members of organizations must have submitted their own comments to meet the requirements of eligibility as an individual. Objections received on behalf of an organization are considered as those of the organization only. Names and addresses of those who comment or file objections will become part of the public record.

For more information on how the objection process works for projects and activities implementing land and resource management plans and the requirements, contact Karen Iwamoto, National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Coordinator at (907) 747-4230 or read the regulations under 36 CFR 218 Subparts A and B on the National Forest Service web site at http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2013-03-27/pdf/2013-06857.pdf

The Tongass National Forest is providing a 30-day comment period for the public to submit comments for the proposed Improvements for NLECC Roads.

Public scoping meetings will be held at the following locations and times:

- January 14, 2015, 6:30 PM: Naukati City Council Meeting
- January 22, 2015, 1-3 PM: Whale Pass Library
- January 27, 2015, 6-7 PM: Craig Ranger District

Specific written comments on this project will be accepted at this meeting. This letter also includes a pre-addressed comment form for you to write your comments. Comments can be
mailed to U.S. Forest Service, Craig Ranger District, c/o Rich Jacobson, PO Box 500, Craig, AK 99921; faxed to (907) 826-2972; or sent via email to comments-alaska-tongass-thorne-bay@fs.fed.us. Comments may also be hand-delivered to either the Craig or Thorne Bay Ranger Districts—located at 900 Main Street, Craig, AK 99921, and 1312 Federal Way, Thorne Bay, AK 99919, respectively. In all correspondence respondents should: 1) reference "Improvements for Neck Lake and El Capitan Cave Roads"; 2) include name, address, telephone number, e-mail, and organization represented, if any; and 3) discuss specific facts, concerns, issues, and the supporting reasons.

All comments must be postmarked by February 6, 2015. Comments submitted electronically must be searchable or readable with optical character recognition software.

The draft EA will be mailed out to those who respond to this scoping letter, to those who have requested the document, or are eligible to file an objection in accordance with Sec. 218.5(a).

Contact Richard Jacobson, Forest Service Transportation Planner, at (907) 826-1626 or email r.jacobson@fs.fed.us for more details about the public meetings or for more information on the project or release of the draft EA for comment.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Rachelle Huddleston-Lorton
Thorne Bay District Ranger

Enclosures:
- Abbreviated Description of: Decisions to be Made, Project Purpose and Need, and Proposed Action
- Maps: Project Area & Proposed Action
- Comment Form
Decisions to be Made
Based on the environmental analysis in this EA, the District Ranger will decide whether to authorize construction, reconstruction, realignment, or other improvements to road conditions on the roads heading east and north from the Neck Lake junction, and if so, how the improvements will be implemented. Decisions will be made in accordance with Forest Plan goals, objectives, and desired future conditions. The decisions will include:

- The location, design, and scheduling of road construction activities.
- Mitigation measures and monitoring requirements, including avoiding significant restriction to subsistence uses.

Project Purpose and Need
The purpose and need of the proposed Improvements for Neck Lake El Capitan Cave (NLECC) Roads project is to: 1) support current and future transportation systems, principally the Southeast Alaska Transportation Plan (SATP); 2) improve the physical and operational features of the existing road; 3) support planned economic development with efficient access to North Prince of Wales Island (NPOW); 4) improve access to recreational and subsistence activities; and 5) provide a reliable link from NPOW to the rest of Prince of Wales Island.

The project is consistent with the following goals and objectives of the 2008 Tongass National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan):

1. Provide access to and through the National Forest for all users (2008 Forest Plan:2-8).
2. Develop and manage roads and utility systems to support resource management activities; recognize the potential for future development of major Transportation and Utility Systems (TUSs) (2008 Forest Plan:2-8).
3. Manage and maintain roads to protect natural and cultural resources (2008 Forest Plan:2-8).
4. Provide a diversity of opportunities for resource uses that contribute to the local and regional economies of Southeast Alaska (2008 Forest Plan:2-5).
5. Provide a range of recreation opportunities consistent with public demand, emphasizing locally popular recreation places and those important to the tourism industry (2008 Forest Plan:2-6).

Proposed Action
The proposed road improvements project will be divided into three segments (refer to the Proposed Action Map). Segment 1 starts at the Neck Lake junction and goes east along National Forest System Road (NFSR) 25000000 to its intersection with NFSR 30000000 south of the Neck Lake outlet. Segment 2 proceeds north along NFSR 30000000 around Whale Passage and then south to the community of Whale Pass along NFSR 30650000. The eastern terminus is the Whale Pass boat launch (located 375 feet past the access road to the seaplane base). The western segment, Segment 3, also starts at the Neck Lake junction and proceeds north and then west to the El Capitan Cave parking lot. The NFSRs included in Segment 3 from the Neck Lake junction heading west and then north are: 20000000 and 15000000, respectively. Features common to all segments are discussed below.

The proposed action would meet the project purpose and need by improving roads that are part of the existing and future Prince of Wales Island transportation system, as planned in the Southeast Alaska Transportation Plan. The existing road segments between Whale Pass and El Capitan Cave were built as single-lane logging roads. The proposed project would be designed to bring the road up to American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) design standards. Depending on the specific portion of the roads, some would be to 25-mph design standards, while others will be to 30-mph. The proposed improvements would
allow vehicles to pass safely in two directions, either by constructing inter-visible turnouts or by widening the roads to two lanes. The additional lane width would accommodate a range of vehicles and drivers that are not familiar with safe driving practices for single-lane roads. Also higher design speeds would allow for more efficient travel and increased economic development potential in Whale Pass and pullouts and recreational enhancements would allow for improved recreational and subsistence access. The proposed action would meet the project purpose and need while limiting environmental impacts.

Maintenance of the road would shift from the Forest Service to the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF). Maintenance costs and efforts would decrease substantially both in the short term and long term after the proposed improvements. One of the purposes of the proposed action is to reduce maintenance costs for these roads, and there are several components of the proposed project that would reduce the maintenance costs and effort. A paved surface would require less frequent maintenance because the new surface would be more durable than the existing surface. Installing appropriately sized stream crossing structures would better protect the stability of the shoulders while reducing the need for future costly maintenance. Consistent road width and designated travel lanes would concentrate the vehicle load farther from the road edges, which protects the road edges and reduces the need for surface and shoulder maintenance.

The proposed roads would be a uniform roadway of up to two 11-foot lanes and two 3-foot shoulders. Some of the roadway may be single lane only with inter-visible turnouts. The improvements will be a full AASHTO-compliant reconstruction for a 25 to 30-mph design speed. These improvements would address the inconsistent road width, lack of shoulders, and the substandard driving surface. The redesign would involve grade reductions, changes to curve radii, drainage improvement, pavement marking, and the addition of signage and guardrails. The majority of the road would be reconstructed within the existing corridor to reduce environmental impacts and minimize construction costs.

To manage project costs, the engineering design would strive to balance cut-and-fills along every mile of the project. Blasting may occur along the entire length of the corridor to accommodate these cut-and-fill balances, as well as to further develop rock sources at existing rock pits. Waste material would be disposed of offsite in upland areas suitable for filling, for example existing rock pits. Slash would be available for residents to use as firewood or burned.

The project would maintain natural drainage patterns and fish crossings. The existing undersized stream and drainage crossings structures would be replaced and additional drainage culverts would be added. The structures would be designed to accommodate the appropriate design storm, as follows: bridges would be designed to accommodate the 50-year flood flow; all other drainage crossings would be designed to accommodate the 25-year flood flow. Most bridges are anticipated to be single-span structures, although there could be several two span bridges. Crossings designated as resident or anadromous crossings would be designed to meet current design standards for aquatic organism passage.

Conducting the proposed action’s improvements would require space to stage equipment, mine and process fill, and store surfacing material and erosion-protection armor, as well as dispose of excess waste soil excavated during construction. Existing open areas would be used for staging areas, and material would be mined and processed at existing sites. Excess materials will be disposed of in existing rock pits along the roadway. Upon completion of construction, these sites would be reclaimed and revegetated on Forest Service-managed lands per Forest Service guidelines and per negotiations with other landowners on private lands.
The construction timing would be staged over multiple years based on funding availability. The order of the stages is not known at this time because the sources of funding would likely define the portions that would be constructed. Logical portions, or phases, would be included in the construction design.

During construction there would be temporary impacts in the form of traffic delays and inconveniences for road users along the roadway. Prior to construction activity, in order to keep traffic moving along the road as efficiently and safely as possible, a temporary traffic control plan would be developed. Traffic control devices, signage, and detour plans would be detailed in this plan. This plan would include public notification plans. Truck traffic along the roadway would increase as construction materials are hauled to and from material source and disposal sites. This impact is expected to be minimal, because a traffic control plan would be developed prior to construction activity that would keep traffic moving through the project area as efficiently and safely as possible. The public would be notified of construction activities that would impact travel along the road.
Please provide your contact information below if you would like to be on our project mailing list:

Your Contact Information:

Your Name_______________________________
Organization______________________________
Address__________________________________
City/State/Zip______________________________
E-mail Address_____________________________
Phone Number_____________________________

Contact Preference (check one):

□ E-mail
□ Mailing Address

Thank you for your interest in the project!

Fold this form in thirds, making sure to display the mailing portion. Please tape and affix the correct postage.

U.S. Forest Service
Craig Ranger District
c/o Rich Jacobson
PO Box 500, Craig, AK 99921

RE: Improvements for Neck Lake and El Capitan Cave Roads

You are invited to provide input regarding the U.S. Forest Service’s Improvements for Neck Lake and El Capitan Cave Roads Environmental Assessment.

Please provide your contact information:

Contact Information:

Phone Number
E-mail Address
City/State/Zip
Address
Organization
Name

Your Contact Information:

Project mailing list:
If you would like to be on our contact information below please provide your
How did you hear about the project?