

Exploring Relationships between Local Stakeholders and Chugach National Forest Managers: A Participatory Action Case Study of Moose Pass, Alaska

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Alaska is the largest state in the United States with more than $\frac{3}{4}$ of the total land area under federal management. In this state, balancing the needs of rural communities and federal land agencies such as the Forest Service requires a deep understanding of the relationship between these entities and the values that each brings to the endeavor of ecosystem management. Understanding these relationships and the means by which they are maintained or eroded and working towards building more participatory and collaborative relationships for the future is especially important in the community of Moose Pass, Alaska.

Moose Pass is completely surrounded by the Chugach National Forest (CNF), the second largest national forest in the United States with over 5.6 million acres. Moose Pass is an unincorporated community of about 225 residents located on the Kenai Peninsula along the Seward Highway and the Alaska Railroad. The community has been affected by three major land management decisions in the past five years, all of which came from the Forest Service and include the North Shore Kenai Lake Prescribed Burn that turned into a Wildfire (2001), Carter/Crescent Lakes Motorized/Non-Motorized decision (2003), and Commercially Guided Helicopter Skiing on the Kenai Peninsula.

In November 2004, Alaska Pacific University was requested by the Forest Service to collaboratively monitor community attitudes, beliefs and perception of changes in regard to the Helicopter Skiing decision. The methodology used to monitor these impacts was the Interactive Community Forum (ICF), a social impact assessment method that seeks community members' judgments related to project alternatives in a participant driven, facilitated small group process. The ICF indicated that the relationship between the community and the Forest Service has changed dramatically in the past five years. ICF participants feel this change in relationship is deeply rooted in the values that the community has for its surroundings and their sense of place, the mistrust felt by the community in regard to FS management decisions, and inconsistent and ineffective public participation methods employed by the agency to involve the community in decisions. An outcome of the ICF is the community identified need for and willingness to co-sponsor my project.

A participatory action case study was chosen for this project to a) explore and analyze this historical and current relationship between the agency and the community through a review of the three controversial land management decisions and, b) to collaboratively develop a framework for future action. A total of 50 in-depth interviews were completed with community residents and FS employees in the summer of 2005 while living in the community of Moose Pass, triangulated with attending public meetings in the community and archival documentation. Understanding the relationship between the community and the Forest Service will enable both parties to identify the roots of conflict and where certain levels of distrust originate, build better relationships that recognize multiple perspectives and concerns, and promote closer collaboration and more informed judgments on highly controversial land management decisions in Alaska.