

FY 2025-2026 Forest Service Report to the Southeast Alaska Subsistence Regional Advisory Council

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Introduction

The Alaska Subsistence Team, along with other Forest Service staff and our many partners, have accomplished significant work in support of the Tongass Subsistence Program and Alaska subsistence way of life. The management of National Forest lands for subsistence uses plays a vital role in sustaining the health of rural Alaskan communities by ensuring that healthy fish and wildlife populations are available to provide a reliable food supply for residents. The Federal Subsistence Management Program (Program) plays an important role in maintaining employment in rural Alaska where opportunities are limited, as well.

The Forest Service supports the subsistence way of life in rural communities by implementing critical monitoring and management activities using funds specifically allocated toward subsistence uses on National Forest lands. In partnership with the Department of the Interior (DOI), the Forest Service continued to contribute to and work cooperatively across the State of Alaska on DOI public lands, as well. Activities included annual rulemaking, fish and wildlife monitoring, law enforcement and education, employment in rural communities, and capacity building. The Forest Service regularly held public hearings and consulted with Alaska Native Tribes and Native Corporations to comply with presidential and secretarial policy and to be respectful of the current and historical role of Native Alaskans and other Federally qualified rural subsistence users, while managing for customary and traditional subsistence uses.

Tongass Subsistence Dashboard

The Tongass Subsistence Team (Team) continued to implement the online digital Subsistence Dashboard initiated in 2024 with up to date fish and wildlife permit and harvest database information and accompanying maps. Subsistence staff conducted public workshops and hearings, and Tribal and ANCSA Corporation Consultations, throughout Southeast Alaska to inform the public and listen to subsistence users about their experiences, needs, and concerns related to Special Action Requests and other regulatory actions. Many of these activities are available for public review on the Subsistence Dashboard or the Office of Subsistence Management (OSM) website.

Youth Engagement

In FY 2026, the Forest Service Subsistence Team helped promote Youth Engagement and participation in the Federal Subsistence Management Program in southeast Alaska communities by supporting the Federal Subsistence Management Program courses taught at the University of Alaska in Southeast Sitka. Forest Service Subsistence Biologist, Ashley Bolwerk, and Sitka Conservation Society (SCS) Fisheries Community Engagement Specialist, Heather Bauscher, taught Youth Engagement Classes twice a week for four weeks at the college in Sitka. Students earned class credits from the University of Alaska Southeast, while learning about Title VIII of

ANILCA, the Federal Subsistence Management Program regulatory process, and Federal subsistence priority, as well as the State of Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADF&G) Board of Fish and Board of Game regulatory processes.

The number of students participating in the Federal Subsistence Management Program courses at the University of Alaska Southeast has continued to grow. In addition, in FY 2026, six students participated in the Board's April 2026 Wildlife Regulatory meeting. Each student gave testimony sharing their personal experiences about living a subsistence lifestyle in Southeast Alaska. Also in April 2026, the SCS and the University of Alaska Southeast printed its first Teaching Guide: *Navigating the Federal Subsistence Management Program*. The Guide's purpose is to help Alaskans learn how they can participate in the Federal Subsistence Management Program and contribute to the management of traditional fish and wildlife subsistence resources.

It is worth noting that the Forest Service/SCS Youth Engagement program is highly regarded across the State of Alaska, with all nine other Subsistence Councils looking to the Southeast Region for guidance on how to begin their own programs!

Finally, Forest Service staff, once again, worked with the Alaska Youth Stewards in the Youth Harvest Program, taking kids into the field to catch Sockeye salmon in Falls Lake near Kake and Basket Bay near Angoon and taught them how to process salmon and then delivered the salmon to elders in the villages.

Tongass National Forest Plan

The Tongass National Forest Plan was last revised in 1997. Beginning in 2024, Forest Service subsistence staff contributed extensively in the process of revising and expanding the Subsistence Section of the new Tongass National Forest Plan. With assistance from the NEPA Pacific Planning Support Group (PPSG), the Alaska Forest Service subsistence staff contributed a significant amount of time and energy to draft the Tongass National Forest Plan Subsistence Assessment. With the Subsistence Assessment completed, the Subsistence Team next helped develop a 'Need for Change' document that describes desired future conditions, goals and objectives, and standards and guidelines for implementing the subsistence program on the Tongass. Next, under the guidance of NEPA planners from PPSG, several public meetings were held to take comments on all Tongass Plan Assessments and offer an opportunity for the public to make suggestions for modifying the Tongass National Forest Plan. The next step awaiting the Subsistence Team is help draft the subsistence section of the new Tongass National Forest Plan. The Subsistence Team looks forward to continuing to engage with the Council throughout the remainder of the Tongass National Forest Planning Process, which is slated to last through 2028.

Forest Service Subsistence Budget

Since the new administration took office in Washington DC in early 2025, the federal government has undergone significant changes. The 2026 Forest Service fiscal year began on October 1, 2025, and continues through September 30, 2026. During much of this time, the Forest Service has been operating under an interim operations process. Meanwhile, the USDA has been devising a way to re-organize all USDA agencies, including the Forest Service.

The USDA Alaska Region Forest Service subsistence budget (SMSM), a line item in the United States Congressional Budget, remained unchanged from previous years at \$1,099,00. In FY 2026, the Alaska Forest Service Subsistence Program received its entire budget early in the fiscal year, relatively speaking. In addition, we received an additional \$301,229 in SMSM funds leftover from prior years. The addition of these prior year funds, the SMSM total budget was \$1,400,229.

Note, the subsistence operations budget does not include the cost of salaries and travel, which are paid out of a separate cost code. Salaries and travel related to subsistence work are estimated to cost over \$1 million for Forest Service personnel that conducted subsistence-related work in FY 2026. Travel has been limited to mission critical activities, emergencies, and Congressional priorities. Likewise, purchasing has been held in check until reviewed and approved in Washington DC.

Subsistence funding enabled the Forest Service to continue to meet its responsibilities under the 1980 Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), as well as provide vital employment in isolated rural communities. Using subsistence operations base funding, Forest Service personnel collected fish and wildlife population data and harvest information essential for keeping fish and wildlife populations healthy and productive and ensured the continuation of subsistence uses by Alaska rural residents.

Fisheries Resource Monitoring Program

In FY 2026, the Tongass National Forest funded in five Fisheries Resource Monitoring Program (FRMP) projects in Southeast Alaska with partners ranging from rural and Tribal communities to ADF&G. Approximately \$785,889 of the Forest Service Subsistence budget was used to fund FRMP projects this year (Table 1.). Unspent prior year subsistence funds allowed us to fund two FRMP projects in advance for an additional year each. In addition, the OSM continued to fund the *Copper River Chinook Salmon In-river Abundance* FRMP project for \$235,000. This FRMP project is within the boundary of the Chugach National Forest in the Southcentral Region. Note, because this project was funded by OSM, it is not included in Table 1 below.

Table 1. *FY 2026 Alaska Region 10 Forest Service Subsistence Budget

Chugach 2026 Subsistence Operations	\$50,000
Tongass 2026 Subsistence Operations	\$77,045
2026 Tongass FRMP Projects	\$785,889
SCA Intern	\$35,000
Fleet 2629 (\$68,522) + Fleet 2528 (\$16,810)	\$85,332
Director Miscellaneous (LFW Contract, OTT ACES)	\$35,171
Subsistence Support to OSM	\$100,000
Law Enforcement (toward boat replacement)	\$50,000
@Total Forest Service Subsistence Budget	\$1,218,437

*Forest Service Salaries are paid from a different cost code

@ SMSM Base 1,099,000 + prior year funds \$301,229 = \$1,400,229; remaining balance \$181,792

In contrast to the FRMP, there is no official Subsistence Wildlife Resource Monitoring Program; although, each Forest spends subsistence base funds to monitor wildlife populations important

for subsistence. On the Tongass National Forest, \$77,045 went toward district field operations and supplies. We did not fund the Sitka Conservation Society (SCS) work with youth in 2026 because the SCS had received a large grant (\$350,000) from the Forest Service Washington Office in 2024, in which they were still operating. However, we plan to provide SCS with at least \$35,000 in FY 2027. On the Chugach National Forest, \$50,000 went toward monitoring black bear, deer, moose, and mountain goat populations. Also, as in previous years, we provided \$50,000 in subsistence funds to supplement Forest Service Law Enforcement (LE) within the Alaska Region.

Finally, in 2026, \$100,000 of the Forest Service subsistence funding is allocated to OSM to support the Southeast and Southcentral Regional Advisory Councils. As in the past, OSM Anthropology and Biology staff will continue to help Forest Service staff review and analyze wildlife and fisheries proposals, Closure Reviews, and Special Action Requests. A new Interagency Agreement (IA) had to be developed this year with OSM, in the DOI office of Policy, Management and Budget (PMB), because the previous agreement had expired.

Forest Service Staffing and Reorganization Update

On March 31, 2026, the USDA Forest Service announced a comprehensive nationwide re-organization of the agency, as well as a freeze on all hiring. One aspect of the re-organization included abolishing all nine Regional Offices with the goal of replacing them with fifteen State Offices. Nationwide, a large number of Regional Office staff reacted by choosing to take downgraded positions on Forests or Ranger Districts, left federal service entirely by retiring, retiring early using the VERA/VICEP programs, or by taking the Deferred Resignation Program (DRP).

The Forest Service is still in an interim operations phase of the re-organization as the plan continues to be developed. Numerous town hall meetings have been held over the past several months about the re-organization process and effects on overall Forest Service staffing. Forest Service employees have appreciated these meetings with leadership, which provided opportunities for individuals to ask questions, but many questions and concerns remain. Most recently, we heard that the re-organization could be implemented as early as January 2027.

In Alaska, the Forest Service has gone from almost 700 permanent staff to 467 since the new administration came to office. The greatest loss (90%) has come from the Regional Office, which is anticipated to have about 10 staff in the new State Office when it is up and running, compared to approximately 120 staff that originally had officially worked as Juneau Regional Office staff. The Tongass National Forest lost about 30% of its staff and the Chugach lost approximately 35% of its staff.

Forest Service employees have been required to work in a federal office building because of a 'Return to Work' Executive Order, with the exception of a very few individuals who received permission to work remotely. No telework agreements are currently being honored. Many people are doing more than one job.