

Chapter 14

The Alsea Community Resource Unit

Section One: Baseline Social and Economic Information

A. Community Description

Geographic Features

The Alsea Community Resource Unit stretches from the Siuslaw Forest lands to the north, west to a line roughly parallel with the Lincoln/Benton County line just a few miles west of Alsea (where the coastal influence takes over), almost to the Lane County line on the south, and east to points southwest of Philomath and northwest of Monroe. Figure 40 shows a map of this area.

"The school district defines our community. It goes toward Waldport until the county line, north to the summit toward Philomath, south to Lane County line and a little past to pull in some of those kids."

Settlement Patterns

Alsea is a beautiful community situated on the edge of the Siuslaw National Forest, midway between Waldport and Corvallis on Highway 34. Alsea's web site, posted by Casco Communication, estimates Alsea's population to be about 1200. The site states that, "Mary's Peak, the highest point in the Coast Range, is just 8 miles east of Alsea. The Alsea River, noted for its runs of salmon and steelhead, flows through town. The lush rainforest climate offers temperate living conditions and many opportunities for outdoor recreation."

Alsea is isolated even more than most rural communities, and its history is based on that isolation. The requirements of self-sufficiency and cooperation necessary for survival, and reliance on natural resources available locally, notably timber, have shaped the character of the

Figure 40
Map of the Alsea Community Resource Unit

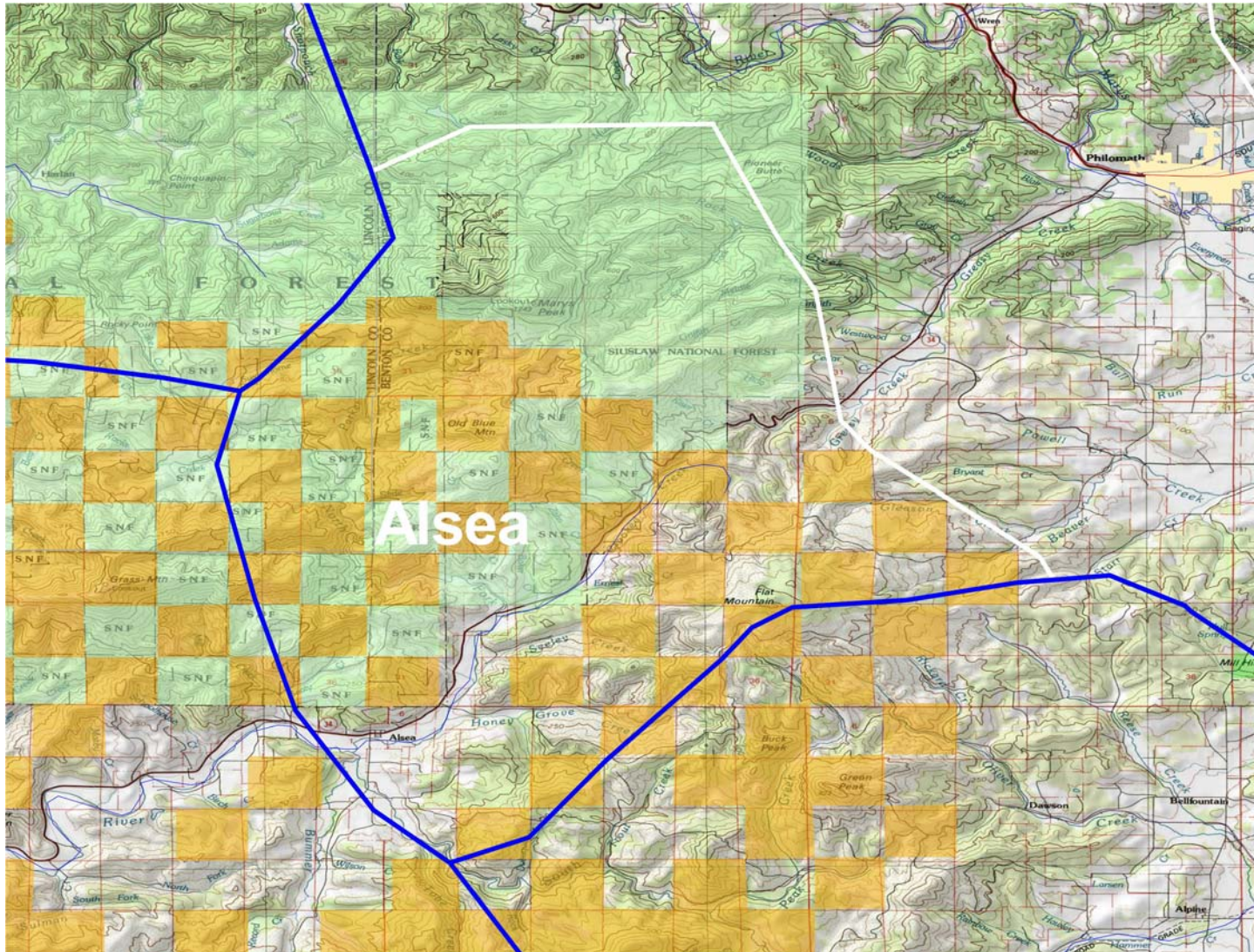


Figure 41
Photo of Downtown Alsea



community. Many families have been in the area are 5 and 6 generations. Old family names include Bedell, Hendrix, Rycraft, Slates, Vernon, and Wilcox. The Alsea CRU includes lands owned by BLM, U.S. Forest Service, Starker Forests, Weyerhaeuser (taken over from Willamette Industries), and Georgia Pacific. Figure 41 shows a photo of downtown Alsea.

There are many social and family ties between Philomath and Alsea. As the local economy in Alsea declined, workers began commuting to Philomath and Corvallis, and commuting is now the dominant economic pattern.

"The road [between Alsea and Philomath] is fine and most people don't mind it. There's just that one stretch of curves and then it's OK."

"I used to commute but there weren't too many of us. Now, everyone is commuting."

"We are a bedroom community to Corvallis."

As in other parts of the region, newcomers are making themselves felt in Alsea, but their presence is very much reduced compared to other towns.

"Newcomers are retired people. They cycle out in ten years as they get older. There's nothing to connect them with others. They bring their hobbies with them."

"In 1980, the population was 1700. Now I'd guess it's 2000, so what we've lost in big families, we now have commuters."

"There are 1500-1600 people here."

Publics

The major publics of Alsea are long-time families, timber and forest workers, commuters, home-based business people, and young families.

Networks

See Section Two.

Work Routines

When the Forest Service had its office in Alsea, it was the town's major employer. Since its closure, the school has become the primary employer. The mills closed but there is still some logging activity on private lands. With the mills closing, residents have started going farther to work. Commuting has become the norm.

At least some people make a living in the regional economy in some way. One gentleman, a retired Forest Service employee, chose to retire rather than to transfer when the FS Alsea office closed. He now raises exotic birds and furnishes pet stores in the Northwest.

Nurseries are an important part of this small economy, but apparently they are declining in number. People said that "only" three nurseries are left, the ones along the highway.

Alsea used to have a strong artist community but it has declined in recent years. Although a few artists remain, generally the distance to their markets has encouraged people to move elsewhere.

Residents feel like their economic options are limited. Cottage industry is not easy because markets are distant. Internet options seem limited also. The T1 lines were lost with the Forest Service, one resident said. Satellite is not reliable and there is no DSL. Apparently, a fiber optic cable goes from Eugene to Newport but residents don't feel they are permitted to tie into it because it's a different company. United Parcel Service (UPS) is forty minutes away.

Support Services

The school was described as the life blood of the community, and said to be struggling because of its small size. But more people thought it suffered the most because of the Forest Service loss. The school now employs 23 teachers and staff and has about 200 students.

Young people move out upon graduation. Residents are very proud that their small school district can compete with others, and they make special efforts to encourage their children to get more education. The Linn-Benton Community College and Oregon State University are favored destinations.

"School functions used to be attended by the whole valley. Now, even the Christmas program isn't as full. Now, no one has time—they're driving."

"The PTA used to get 40-50 people. Now, we're lucky if we get 10."

Alsea Community Effort, ACE, is a 6 year old non-profit that draws on a number of funding sources. Among its projects, it has organized the library effort. The present library is 600 square feet and has an occupancy limit of 12. ACE received a USDA rural community assistance grant for \$24,000 in

1998 for feasibility and planning. It came up with a 3000 square foot plan, plus 1100 square feet for a community multi-purpose room. Some residents criticized the size of the building but the planning group felt it was consistent with the size of the community. ACE also tries to attract small businesses and participates in restoration efforts (see below).

An elderly facility recently closed, Al Senior Center Retirement Homes, which brought revenue into the community. Voters turned down a request for a bond to construct a gym a couple years ago.

People voiced appreciation for their local, home-grown utilities, Pioneer Consolidated (telephone) and Consumer Power Inc. In 1992, these cooperatives, along with Blachly-Lane Electric Cooperative, formed Casco Communications, located in Philomath. It recently purchased PEAK Internet of Corvallis and offers a range of communication technology services in the area.

Recreational Activities

See Section Three.

B. Themes and Citizen Issues Related to Community Life

Themes

1. "There's no job base. If your community is still alive, there's energy and you have new ideas."
2. "We lost our leadership."

Citizen Issues Related to Community Life

Residents had issues about the kind of people moving into the community in recent years.

"Agencies have dumped low energy people on us."

The library is the primary recent success in the community. Residents worked hard to develop the vision of the building, and to attract the resources and the funding necessary to make it happen. Although the Forest Service building was considered, ultimately, people wanted a building closer to the center of town.

"We want a new library but at the right location."

"Kids in the past had a work ethic but kids won't work anymore. As an employer, I have had to start firing, although I hate that."

"Land use laws hurt us. They prevent building. Some things you can't do on your property."

Section Two: Communication Strategies

A. Informal Networks and Communication

The school and the restaurant are important gathering places.

The Stitch and Rip Quilt Club is an informal gathering of women that are active in helping the community.

B. Formal Groups and Communication

Figure 42
Organizations With Interest in Public Lands in Alsea

Organization	Contact Information	Mission
Alsea Community Effort (ACE)	Jackie Nichols (541) 487-4378	Community improvement, economic development
Tidewater Watershed Council ??	Waldport? 464	Restoration projects in Alsea area; joint projects with ACE
Alsea Watershed Council	Linda Johnston 10518 E 5 Rivers Road Tidewater, OR 97390 (541) 528-3221x	
Advocacy for Youth	Mary Francis (541) 487-8994	

Section Three: The Public Lands Perspective

A. Uses of and Orientation to Public Lands

Although no local timber mills exist any longer in this area, and no federal timber sales have reached production stage, logging activity continues. Many people have small timber lots, and a number of larger timberland companies have holdings in the area. Many traditional people (farming, logging) have diverse income strategies that still include logging, as in the past, but now the standard of living associated with that activity has declined.

"We have 100 acres, about half is timber. We thinned for years. Now we started cutting heavier because if the mills go, we'll lose our ability to market at all. People are overcutting."

Residents make clear that the community as a whole has been unable to recover from the loss of the Forest Service. The office reportedly had 123 full-time employees. Youth did job shadowing. The agency successfully blended "rednecks" and "hippies." There was a good bit of tourist activity. Now, tourist information is not as readily available and visitation has dropped. Apparently, two fire staff and one silviculturalist remain of the Forest Service personnel.

"The community was completely behind it [the Forest Service]."

"The library is only open 3 days a week."

Years ago, the Alsea River was in danger of being closed at a popular fishing hole along private property. The story goes that Northwest Steelheaders built a large unavoidable sign that stated the etiquette and the consequences of further problems. People did change their behavior and the river was cleaned up. The sign had a profound effect on how people used the river.

ACE wants connection with the Forest Service through making Alsea salmon friendly so that recreation and tourism can be tied in. The group believes

that good fishing will bring people in. Jobs will happen if the river is improved and more trails are created. ACE has an OWEB proposal pending for the monitoring of beaver habitat. They are using Wyden Amendment money to do restoration on private lands

B. Themes and Citizen Issues Related to Natural Resource Management

Themes

1. "The Forest Service was the last energy."
2. "The Forest Service has a bubble around it. They don't interface much."

Citizen Issues Related to Natural Resource Management

"People are overcutting."

"Some people say this forest can't burn but it's not so. Under the right conditions it would. There's a lot of slash on the ground."

"We need training for restoration and monitoring. The [Siuslaw National] Forest is not letting restoration contracts."

"The Alsea Watershed Council became a wise use platform. It blocks projects."

"ODF tests for herbicide spraying on dry days and find no readings. We tested after rain and got significant readings."

"Clearcuts created slides. Slides will get worse without management. We'll go back to streams washing out."

"Rental places used for Forest Service temporary help is now being used by social service agencies to put people out here for low rent."

"They said they were going to put roads to bed but it got too expensive. Now they are abandoned and we risk greater slides, and stream sediment from erosion."

"You can't get firewood permits now."

"The Forest has to invest in stream restoration and restoration forestry."

"With the current low level of management, fire and roads are big problems."

"The Forest Service should have a local presence, even if it's contracted out. People would get questions, like what to do about these trees...No one is local."

"We're glad they [Forest Service] come to the watershed council meetings."

"The Forest Service would not support library development costs, but said 'yes' to downtown revitalization, even though that idea had not been talked about much in the community."

The most widespread citizen issue related to natural resource management is the disposition of the old Forest Service building. Citizens said that efforts to sell the building have not been successful. In the meantime, many feel that it communicates a feeling of abandonment and failure.

"It's a \$6 million dollar building but it can't be used for anything. It's a public facility set aside, so by law it can't be used for commercial purposes."

"I heard they even tried to pawn it off on the Deschutes Forest. Told them it could help fund their new office, but it didn't work."

"There's been no building maintenance for ten years. There are rats in that building."

"The building has to get resolved before we can go forward. It's an obstacle as it is."

C. Management Opportunities

Alsea is still recovering from the decline of timber production, and specifically with the closure of the Forest Service office. Recovery efforts have been partial at best, since the community not only lost programs and revenue but leadership and community involvement as well. It seems like the agency is supporting newly emerging leadership, like ACE, and these efforts should only continue. Because factions still remain from the struggles of the past, the Forest Service should make special effort to foster and support diverse efforts at economic diversification and forest restoration. The Watershed Councils, particularly, should be influenced to be community-based in their efforts so that they are a force for cooperation and not division.

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