

Recovery Plan for Spotted Owl Ignores Science

In May, FWS released a final Northern Spotted Owl Recovery Plan that fails to incorporate the best available science concerning protection for the old-growth and mature forests that the owl inhabits. Peer reviews of the final plan by The Wildlife Society, the American Ornithologists' Union, and the Society for Conservation Biology all found significant scientific flaws in the strategy, which will likely do the threatened owl more harm than good.

“Under this plan, forest managers are already moving ahead to boost logging of old-growth forests in areas essential to the recovery of the rapidly declining Northern Spotted Owl,” said Steve Holmer, Director of Public Relations for American Bird Conservancy. “The science is clear, the remaining old-growth and mature habitat of the owl needs more protection, not less.”

To conserve the owl, the plan creates Managed Owl Conservation Areas (MOCAs) on 6.4 million acres, which is significantly smaller than the existing system of reserves on 7.5 million acres created under the Northwest Forest Plan. While the MOCAs overlap with the reserves in many places, they provide 1.1 million acres less habitat protection, and do not include forests on the east side of the Cascade Mountains in Oregon and Washington.

The independent science reviews all recommended maintaining current protections for the owl's old-growth forest home included in the Northwest Forest Plan. The rate of decline for owl populations covered by the plan is about 2.4% per year, compared with a rate of 5.8% per year for study areas not covered by the plan, showing that the plan is effective at slowing the Spotted Owl's decline. Dr. Jerry Franklin, a preeminent forestry ecologist at Washington State University, testified before Congress at a June hearing that the MOCAs should have

been built on the Northwest Forest Plan by supplementing the existing network of reserves with additional suitable

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On the positive side, the Recovery Plan recognizes the importance of older and structurally diverse forests outside of the MOCAs. One part of the Plan recommends protection for all of these forest areas, which will provide important habitat for both the Northern Spotted Owl and Marbled Murrelet. However, questions remain about how this requirement will be implemented, and whether it is enforceable. The Plan also calls for an incentives program for non-federal landowners to implement procedures to recruit and maintain spotted owl habitat. To view the Northern Spotted Owl Recovery Plan, visit www.fws.gov/Pacific/ecoservices/Endangered/Recovery/pdf/NSO%20Final%20Rec%20Plan%20051408.pdf

Agreement Offers Hope for Spotted Owls in Washington State

A settlement has been reached ending litigation on the conservation of Northern Spotted Owls on private lands in Washington State. Under the agreement, the Weyerhaeuser Company has agreed to maintain habitat around four owl sites on land owned by the corporation. Additionally, as part of the agreement, the Washington State Forest Practices Board unanimously voted to establish a Policy Working Group on Northern Spotted Owl Conservation, a collaborative group including state officials, industry representatives and conservationists, that will make recommendations about how non-federal lands can contribute to owl conservation.

Last year, the Seattle and Kittitas Audubon Societies won a preliminary injunction in federal court against Weyerhaeuser to stop logging in four areas occupied by Spotted Owls in southwest Washington. The suit was intended to bring Weyerhaeuser and Washington State forest practices into compliance with wildlife protection laws.

Plaintiffs hope the newly formed Working Group will bring about greater habitat protection for the owl, and correct a deficiency in the implementation of the Northwest Forest Plan. The Plan was predicated on the idea that most habitat protection for the owl would be on federal lands, but that state and private lands would also make a contribution in certain areas. Protection called for by the Plan was never established in some parts of Washington State, particularly on the Weyerhaeuser-owned lands. For more information, visit www.dnr.wa.gov.



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