



News Release

Public Affairs Office
PO Box 1306
Albuquerque, NM 87103
505/248-6911
505/248-6915 (Fax)

Southwest Region (Arizona • New Mexico • Oklahoma • Texas) <http://southwest.fws.gov>

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Contacts: Elizabeth Slown, (505) 248-6909 or 363-9592, Diane Katzenberger (303) 236-4578 or Jeff Humphrey, (602) 242-0210

CRITICAL HABITAT DESIGNATED FOR MEXICAN SPOTTED OWL

In response to a court order, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today designated critical habitat for the Mexican spotted owl on Federal lands encompassing 8.6 million acres in Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah. The finding is published in today's *Federal Register*.

The critical habitat boundaries include 4.0 million acres in Arizona, 322,326 acres in Colorado, 2.1 million acres in New Mexico and 2.2 million acres in Utah. Only habitat in those areas that contain the physical and biological features essential for the conservation of the owl is considered as critical and falls under the protection of the Endangered Species Act. The designation relies on guidance from the owl's recovery plan.

"Since the Mexican Spotted Owl was listed in 1993, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and its partners in other Federal agencies have been working to safeguard the species," said Dale Hall, Director of the Service's Southwest Region.

The Mexican spotted owl is a medium-sized bird with dark eyes, dark to chestnut brown coloring, whitish spots on the head and neck and white mottling on the abdomen and breast. It was added to the threatened species list primarily because of habitat loss. The owl can be found in canyons and mountain forests across a range that extends from southern Utah and Colorado, through Arizona, New Mexico and west Texas, down to the mountains of central Mexico. The owl occupies a fragmented distribution throughout its United States range corresponding to the availability of forested mountains and canyons, and, in some cases, rocky canyon lands.

Critical habitat is a term in the Endangered Species Act identifying geographic areas that are essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and may require special management considerations. The designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve, or other conservation area. It does not allow government or public access to private lands.

The designation was completed in response to a lawsuit filed by the Center for Biological Diversity.

In 30 years of implementing the Endangered Species Act, the Service has found that the designation of critical habitat provides little additional protection to most listed species, while preventing the Service from using scarce conservation resources for activities with greater conservation benefits.

In almost all cases, recovery of listed species will come through voluntary cooperative partnerships, not regulatory measures such as critical habitat. Habitat is also protected through cooperative measures under the Endangered Species Act including Habitat Conservation Plans, Safe Harbor Agreements, Candidate Conservation Agreements and state programs. In addition, voluntary partnership programs such as the Service's Private Stewardship Grants and Partners for Fish and Wildlife program also restore habitat. Habitat for endangered species is provided on many national wildlife refuges, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and state wildlife management areas.

Today's rule supercedes previous critical habitat designations. Copies of the final rule and maps are available on the internet at <http://ifw2es.fws.gov/mso/> or by calling the New Mexico Ecological Services field office at 800-299-0196. Written requests may be faxed to 505-346-2542 or mailed to the office at 2105 Osuna Road NE, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 87113.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 544 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to State fish and wildlife agencies.