

# News Release



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## **Plan Marks New Route for Recovering Northern Spotted Owl and Promoting Healthy Northwest Forests**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today released a final revised recovery plan for the threatened northern spotted owl, stepping up actions that so far have helped stem but not reverse the old-growth forest raptor's decline. The revised plan identifies three main priorities for achieving spotted owl recovery: protecting the best of its remaining habitat, actively managing forests to improve forest health, and reducing competition from barred owls, a native of eastern North America that has progressively moved into the spotted owl's range in Washington, Oregon, and northern California.

"For more than 20 years, northern spotted owl recovery has been a focal point of broader forest conservation efforts in the Pacific Northwest," said Robyn Thorson, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Pacific Northwest Regional Director. "This revised recovery plan is based on sound science and affirms that the best things we can do to help the spotted owl turn the corner are conserving its habitat, managing the barred owl, and restoring vitality to our forests."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will use the recovery plan to work with land managers in the Pacific Northwest such as the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management, as well as other federal and non-federal landowners, to advise them on habitat management activities that can benefit the spotted owl and contribute to improved forest health.

Because about 20 million acres of U.S. Forest Service lands and about 2 million acres of Bureau of Land Management lands are potentially affected by recovery plan recommendations, the three agencies worked together on key recommendations related to forest management. Both agencies provided formal letters of support for the plan's recovery goals.

"This recovery plan is a welcome update to the state of the science surrounding the northern spotted owl," said Cal Joyner, Deputy Regional Forester for the Pacific Northwest Region of the U.S. Forest Service. "The plan will help us implement a mix of actively managing and protecting habitat to best contribute to conservation and recovery."

"The recovery plan provides space to develop ecological forestry principles and to actively manage our public forests to achieve the twin goals of improving ecological conditions and supplying timber," said Ed Shepard,

Oregon/Washington State Director for the Bureau of Land Management. “We look forward to continuing our close cooperation with the Fish and Wildlife Service as we put the science from the recovery plan to work in our planning, in evaluating proposed timber projects, and in improving forest health.”

Overarching recommendations in the revised plan include:

- **Conservation of spotted owl sites and high-value spotted owl habitat across the landscape.** This means the habitat protections provided under land use plans on federal land will continue to be a focus of recovery, but protection of other areas is likely needed to achieve full success (including some of the lands previously slated for potential timber harvest on federal lands, and possibly non-federal lands in certain parts of the owl’s range where federal lands are limited).
- **Active management of forests** to make forest ecosystems healthier and more resilient to the effects of climate change and catastrophic wildfire, disease, and insect outbreaks. This involves an “ecological forestry” approach in certain areas that will restore ecosystem functioning and resiliency. This may include carefully applied prescriptions such as fuels treatment to reduce the threat of severe fires, thinning, and restoration to enhance habitat and return the natural dynamics of a healthy forest landscape. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recommends this approach in areas where it promotes ecosystem function and is in the best long-term interest of spotted owl recovery. The agency also strongly affirms adaptive management principles to continually evaluate and refine active forest management techniques.
- **Management of the encroaching barred owl** to reduce harm to spotted owls. Most of the recovery actions the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has carried out since finalizing the spotted owl’s 2008 recovery plan deal with the barred owl threat. A major part of this is developing a proposal for experimental removal of barred owls in certain areas to see what effect that would have on spotted owls, and then to evaluate whether or not broad scale removal should be considered. This portion of the 2008 plan was not significantly revised.

“While the new recovery plan has been refined and improved from the 2008 version, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service continues to implement the most important recommendations,” said Acting U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Rowan Gould. “We have begun to address the barred owl threat, improved survey protocols, and developed incentives for private landowners to voluntarily participate in recovery actions. We look forward to expanding conservation partnerships to contribute to the spotted owl’s recovery.”

Since the northern spotted owl was listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) 21 years ago, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and recovery partners are benefitting from far more information on what factors most affect its survival and productivity. This includes a broader body of scientific knowledge on the species itself and forest ecosystem dynamics — including variables such as climate change and the role of natural disturbances such as wildfire. Recovery partners also are taking advantage of new science and technology to develop more precise tools for analyzing how different strategies can contribute to recovery.

In addition, land managers have made significant strides in advancing active forest management techniques to promote the health and resilience of forest ecosystems. The recovery plan emphasizes the concept of adaptive management to apply new knowledge and science to those techniques on an ongoing basis. This is a more mainstream approach today than in 1994 when the Northwest Forest Plan was created to address the needs of several forest-dependent species, including the spotted owl, and the region’s timber industry.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service developed a final recovery plan specific to the spotted owl for the first time in 2008. As the agency and recovery partners moved forward in implementing many recommendations in the 2008 plan, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service initiated a targeted scientific revision to some portions of that plan after facing legal challenges and critical reviews from leading scientific organizations in the conservation community.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service tapped the knowledge and perspectives of public and private sector experts over the last two years in developing this revised plan, the draft of which was released in September 2010. The agency held more than 30 workshops and meetings with public and private partners throughout the spotted owl's range to share information, evaluate options, and incorporate valuable input during the revised plan's development. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service accepted public comments on the draft revised plan for a 90-day period and received more than 11,700 comments. In April 2011, the agency released an updated Appendix C, relating to a new habitat modeling tool, for an additional 30-day public comment period and received about 20 public comments.

The revised recovery plan does not include recommendations from the 2008 plan for a new habitat conservation network of "Managed Owl Conservation Areas." Rather than creating a potentially confusing new land classification, the plan identifies the scientific rationale and parameters for habitat protection and will revise the spotted owl's designated critical habitat to reflect the latest scientific information about areas essential for the owl's recovery. Identifying this habitat through the critical habitat process — as the ESA intended — will be more efficient and provide land managers and the public with additional opportunities for review and comment.

For a recovery timeline, Frequently Asked Questions, related information, and the recovery plan itself, visit [www.fws.gov/oregonfwo](http://www.fws.gov/oregonfwo).

America's fish, wildlife and plant resources belong to all of us, and ensuring the health of imperiled species is a shared responsibility. The Service is working to actively engage conservation partners and the public in the search for improved and innovative ways to conserve and recover imperiled species. To learn more about the Service's Endangered Species program, go to <http://www.fws.gov/angered/>.

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