

News Release



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Service Identifies Habitat to Support Northern Spotted Owl Recovery

*Action important part of comprehensive recovery plan that includes Barred Owl management, active forest management and protection of key habitat;
Final plan excludes private lands; Reflects scientific, stakeholder feedback*

Today, in compliance with an order from the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) finalized a science-based proposal identifying lands in the Pacific Northwest that are essential to the survival and recovery of the northern spotted owl.

The final designation, based on the best available science and including feedback from experts, regional stakeholders, land management agencies and public comment, reduces the amount of critical habitat in California, Oregon and Washington that was proposed last February by 4.2 million acres. All private lands and the significant majority of state lands identified in the proposal (<http://goo.gl/eQ6Nv>) have been excluded from the final rule.

The 2011 revised Recovery Plan (<http://goo.gl/eAsrE>) for the Northern Spotted Owl identified three main priorities for achieving spotted owl recovery: reducing competition from barred owls, actively managing forests to improve forest health, and protecting the best of the spotted owl's remaining habitat. Today's action is an important step in the Service's work with federal and state agencies and other partners to accelerate the owl's recovery, while supporting active management of forests with ecological timber harvests. The Service is also working on a concurrent strategy to manage barred owl populations (<http://goo.gl/eMboR>). The overall spotted owl population is declining at a rate of 2.9 percent per year – leading to an estimated 40% decline in numbers over the last 25 years.

In finalizing the critical habitat designation, the Service considered information received from land management agencies, the public, and scientific peer reviewers, as well as analysis of the economic impacts of potential designations and conservation efforts already in place that could preclude the need for designating some areas.

The Service's identification of 9.29 million acres of critical habitat on federal land and 291,570 acres on state land will provide federal agencies, including the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service, with the information they need to ensure protection for remaining old growth forests, while implementing ecological timber harvests (<http://goo.gl/xraqc>) to improve habitat and its resilience to wildfire and insect infestations. Designation of critical habitat state lands, primarily in Oregon, will have almost no impact on either the state's management of those lands or the timber harvest on those lands.

"We applied the best available science to identify the remaining habitat essential to the spotted owl's recovery – and to ensure that our recovery partners have the clarity and flexibility they need to make effective land management decisions," said Robyn Thorson, Director of the Service's Pacific Region. "We fully support conservation strategies and forest treatments that restore the health and natural dynamics of entire forest ecosystems to sustain all their many values."

A critical habitat designation only affects federal actions in designated areas. Designations do not provide additional protection on non-federal lands unless proposed activities involve federal funding or permitting. "Improved forest health is important for recovery of the northern spotted owl," said Kent Connaughton, Regional Forester for the USFS Pacific Northwest Region. "We are actively managing National Forest lands to create more resilient ecosystems, improve wildlife habitat, and benefit communities."

"The BLM and the USFWS have worked together to try to find the sweet spot – providing for the required conservation of the northern spotted owl and recognizing the importance of BLM lands to the social fabric of western Oregon. This rule is a direct result of those interactions" said Jerome Perez, Oregon/Washington State Director for BLM. "We look forward to this continued collaboration as we carry forward the concept of active management and spotted owl conservation into our project and land use planning."

Paul Henson, State Supervisor of the Service's Oregon Fish and Wildlife Office, noted that "lands designated as critical habitat are not a reserve in the traditional sense. In many places, they should be actively managed to benefit spotted owls or meet other important conservation goals."

This announcement comports with the President's Executive Order on regulatory reform and a Presidential Memorandum directing the Department of the Interior to give careful consideration, to the extent permitted by law and science, to providing the maximum exclusion of areas from the final rule. Today's announcement also provides clear direction for industry and other stakeholders on how ecological forestry can be conducted as part of the final rule.

The northern spotted owl was protected under the Endangered Species Act as a threatened species in 1990. Today's critical habitat decision revises a 2008 critical habitat designation in response to a court order. The Service is working to integrate spotted owl recovery efforts within plans for a healthy, resilient Northwest forest landscape, building on the tenets of the 1994 Northwest Forest Plan.

To view the Service's revised critical habitat designation for the northern spotted owl and learn more about it visit www.fws.gov/oregonfwo.

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