

Scientific Review Committee

Northern Spotted Owl Recovery Plan Executive Group and Implementation Team

Charter April, 2009

Preface

In May 2008, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS or Service) completed the Recovery Plan for the Northern Spotted Owl (Plan). The northern spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis caurina*) was listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act in 1990. The Science Review Committee (SRC) was formed to provide independent scientific advice and recommendations regarding scientific issues related to the successful implementation of the Plan. These issues may be defined by the Executive Group, Implementation Team, or any of the multiple work groups created to implement the Plan.

I. Purpose

The SRC will advise decision-makers on the degree to which actual or proposed decisions associated with implementing the Plan are consistent with the best available scientific and technical information, in a risk assessment framework. The scientific integrity of the Plan's implementation is best ensured through the full and transparent consideration of all relevant scientific and technical information. In the face of scientific uncertainty, which is always present to some degree, a scientifically-valid process clearly identifies the range of issues and uncertainties, explores prevailing and differing perspectives, describes assumptions behind models and other synthesis efforts, and draws conclusions with pros/cons from either a single or multiple understandings.

II. Executive Group Oversight

The Executive Group will oversee the formation and management of the SRC. The Executive Group will approve appointments to the SRC from a list of nominees developed by the Implementation Team.

III. Scope of SRC activities

A. Scientific services

The SRC will advise decision-makers on scientific and technical issues relating to the successful implementation of the Plan. Principal activities include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Technical review of documents and products (e.g., models, data, monitoring plans, management plans, recovery actions) prepared by the Plan's work groups, the Executive Group, or the Implementation Team.
2. Gather, evaluate, and synthesize the best available technical information on a scientific topic either for use in a scientific review, stand alone report, other document, or management decision.
3. Review and provide technical advice on priorities for recovery efforts, including research, monitoring, and evaluation.

B. Scientific Review

The SRC is to review questions that are amenable to scientific analysis and investigation. While many questions pertaining to the recovery of the northern spotted owl contain both scientific and policy aspects, the SRC should confine itself to dealing only with scientific aspects of issues. The SRC will review questions submitted to it and determine if the questions are amenable to scientific analysis. If not, the SRC may respond that it is unable to address the questions or it may suggest aspects of the questions for which scientific insight might be useful.

IV. Membership

Members of the SRC should be experienced scientists with demonstrated achievement and high standing in their field. They will be chosen to fill specific areas of expertise that are needed by the group. Membership may include scientists with expertise in northern spotted owl biology, northwest and southwest forest ecology, statistics, wildlife ecology, genetics, social and economic sciences, and other relevant disciplines. There should be a balance between scientists with specific knowledge of the northern spotted owl and those with more broad and diverse experience. Members will be expected to provide objective scientific advice in a timely and professional manner, and work effectively in a multi-disciplinary setting. SRC membership will be open to individuals employed by all agencies, institutions and organizations.

SRC members are encouraged to publish their reports and analyses as circumstances allow, thereby continuing and improving their own scientific standing. It is expected such publication, especially through peer-reviewed outlets will lend increased credibility to the SRC and their input.

A. Appointment Procedures

Members of the SRC will be approved by the Executive Group. Candidates for the SRC will be submitted by the Implementation Team who will review nominees and make recommendations. Nominations to the SRC shall be solicited from the sponsoring entities as well as other agencies, groups and the public. While nominations to the SRC may come from any of a variety of sources,

members of the SRC are independent scientists and do not represent the interests of the nominating entity or any other entity. New members may be approved to the SRC at any time.

B. Criteria for Membership

The following specific criteria should be considered in selecting members:

- 1) High achievement in a relevant scientific discipline which may include biology, ecology, fisheries, statistics, wildlife ecology, fire ecology, genetics, social and economic sciences, and other relevant disciplines.
- 2) A strong record of scientific accomplishment documented by contribution to the peer-reviewed literature or other evidence of creative scientific accomplishment.
- 3) High standards of scientific integrity, independence and objectivity.
- 4) Ability to forge creative solutions to complex problems.
- 5) Interest in and ability to work effectively in an interdisciplinary setting.

C. Length of Appointments

Appointment to the SRC will normally be three years. Appointments can be renewed pending approval of the Executive Group. Term appointments of the members should be staggered to ensure continuity of effort. After an absence from the SRC, ex-members are eligible for reappointment using the normal appointment procedures outlined above.

D. Staff

Meeting arrangement, fiscal management and other support functions will be provided by the Recovery Coordinator, an employee of the Service.

E. Compensation to Members

Members will serve *pro bono*. However, travel costs (including *per diem*) and other non-salary expenses may be compensated, as funds allow, if such compensation is essential for the participation of the particular SRC member.

F. Additional Subject Matter Experts

The SRC may enlist other subject matter experts to assist in reviews that require additional expertise (e.g., accessing unpublished expertise). Temporary additional experts to the group should be selected using the same criteria as for regular

members and are subject to the same rules regarding bias and conflict of interest as regular members.

V. Procedures

The SRC is a standing group that will meet as needed throughout the year. However, it is expected most SRC activities will not require regular face-to-face meetings and can occur through teleconferences and via email.

Activities conducted by the SRC, such as reviews, can occur in various ways, and the appropriate method will be determined by the SRC Chair and the Recovery Coordinator per issue. Some reviews of work group documents, for example, may entail sending the document out for 3 different individual reviews with or without a follow-up teleconference between just those reviewers to aggregate the comments. Or, a review may be conducted by a subset of the entire SRC via a single teleconference or face-to-face meetings. Flexibility is granted to the SRC Chair to determine the best and most expeditious process for fulfilling individual tasks.

If group decisions are needed for any activity, the SRC will strive to make these decisions via consensus. If the majority of SRC members decide consensus cannot be reached on a particular issue after reasonable discussion, the SRC will describe:

- the different conclusions and assumptions pertaining to the issue
- a clear rationale for each conclusion and assumption
- and, a thorough assessment of the pros and cons of each conclusion.

SRC reviews should include the opportunity for outside input such as briefings from managers and other interested parties so that the SRC understands the context of issues and potential management implications of SRC technical advice. SRC members will be free to seek additional outside peer review of any of their written products as members deem useful and necessary. Where appropriate, SRC reviews should include risk evaluation of the technical impacts of alternative options as defined by the decision-makers relevant to an assigned question.

A. Meetings

The SRC will meet either face-to-face or telephone conferencing as needed. Meetings will provide the opportunity to discuss work and formulate SRC determinations on assignments. Members are expected to place a high priority on attendance and participation in SRC meetings.

B. Communication

The Chair of the SRC will normally act as spokesperson unless another member is designated by the Chair to speak on specific topics. The SRC will normally respond to questions or issues in writing, and public statements should be based

on written opinions. All written communications shall be submitted to the Recovery Coordinator who will be responsible for distributing them to the Executive Group and Implementation Team.

The Recovery Coordinator will act as the point of contact for requests to the SRC and from the SRC to the Executive Group and the Implementation Team, although, at the discretion of the Recovery Coordinator, there may be circumstances when the SRC Chair will interact directly with the Executive Group and Implementation team, such as when seeking clarification on an assignment.

C. Election Terms and Duties of Officers

- a. Elections. Officers of the SRC will be elected by majority secret ballot of the members presided over by the Recovery Coordinator. Ex Officio members are excluded from serving as officers or voting. Election of officers should occur at least 30 days prior to the expiration of the previous officer's term. An election of officers will occur each year.
- b. Officers and Terms. Officers of the SRC shall consist of the Chair and Vice-Chair who will serve one-year terms.
- c. Duties of the Chair. The Chair is the executive officer of the SRC. The Chair acts as the main spokesperson of the group. The Chair, with help from the Recovery Coordinator, arranges for the time and place of meetings, makes or causes to be made a record of the minutes, sends or causes to be sent minutes and other documents to the membership. The Chair, with help from the Recovery Coordinator, conducts the meetings, seeing that business is conducted in a timely and efficient manner and that each member has the opportunity to be heard.
- d. Duties of the vice-Chair. The vice-Chair acts as Chair in the absence of the Chair and assists the Chair in preparation of agendas, minutes, and other duties.

D. Types of Reviews

It is expected the SRC will be asked to provide reviews of specific projects or documents and infrequently to provide larger reports answering specific scientific/technical questions. The SRC will use 2 document formats, each designed to serve a specific purpose.

As a first step in assignments, the SRC identifies the type of report it could complete given the nature of the question, workload and deadlines. Each type of

report will have a standard introductory page, which describes the report type, its strengths and shortcomings. The following table lists potential SRC review products:

<u>SRC Products</u>	<u>Audience</u>	<u>Level of Detail</u>	<u>Time</u>
1. Reviews (Document reviews)	Work Groups	Low/Moderate	Short/Moderate
2. Formal Reports (Research questions)	Imp. Team/Ex Grp	High	Long

The SRC Chair in coordination with the Recovery Coordinator will conduct Reviews much like a scientific journal editor handles submissions. That is, the Chair will coordinate a scientific/technical peer review of each document submitted for review. After receiving a document, the Chair will query the SRC asking for 3-4 volunteers to conduct reviews of the document in a specified timeline. In this way, not all SRC members are expected to review every document.

The Chair's role is to ensure the reviews are provided to the submitting work group according to a timeline agreed to with the Recovery Coordinator. It is the Chair's discretion as to whether internal dialogue (e.g., a teleconference) is required among the SRC reviewers prior to responding to the work group. Depending on the document submitted for review and the timeline, the Chair may decide to simply pass along the 3-4 SRC reviews directly to the work group, without internal SRC discussion. Also, the Chair and Recovery Coordinator will work together to facilitate any post-review discussion between the SRC reviewers and the work group.

For Formal Reports, participation from a larger pool of the SRC will most likely be required. Working with the Recovery Coordinator, the Chair will determine how to conduct such reports and the associated timeline.

SRC also will be given the latitude to explore other forms of reporting, such as use of web sites, model demonstrations, computer presentations, and other structures.

VI. Conflict of Interest

For the SRC to function effectively, it must maintain its status and credibility as a deliberative scientific board. Members must not only avoid activities that create a conflict of interest, but those activities that may represent a significant appearance of conflict of interest or otherwise impair the credibility or status of the committee/team. Given the controversial nature of many of the questions/issues that the SRC must deal with, questionable professional or personal activities could easily undermine the effectiveness of the individual members and ultimately the SRC as a whole. The goal of establishing these conflict of interest guidelines is to maintain the integrity of SRC

opinions. These guidelines incorporate the “Bias and Conflict of Interest” policy that is described in the SRC terms of reference. As a general principle, the SRC will follow the guidelines for bias and conflict of interest outlined in, “The National Research Council Policy on Disclosure of Personal Involvements and Other Matters Potentially Affecting Committee Service” (November 1992) (“the NRC Conflict of Interest Guidelines”).

“Bias” and “Conflict of Interest”

“Bias” relates to views stated or positions taken that are largely intellectually motivated or that arise from the close identification or association with a particular point of view or the positions or perspectives of a particular group. Such potential sources of bias are not necessarily disqualifying for purposes of SRC service. Indeed, membership of the SRC is intended to include individuals with a variety of interests, backgrounds and expertise. However, where bias impairs a member’s ability to view matters in a scientific manner and give fair consideration to new information it can jeopardize the member’s usefulness to the board.

“Conflict of interest” means any financial or other interest which conflicts with the service of the individual because it 1) impairs the individual’s objectivity or 2) could create an unfair competitive advantage for any person or organization within or outside the SRC.

Should a SRC member discover potential undue bias or conflict of interest in a particular assignment, they will recuse themselves from participating in some or all of that specific activity. To help determine degree of potential bias or conflict, the SRC member can confer with other SRC members and with the SRC Chair (or vice-Chair). The SRC Chair (or vice-Chair) will have ultimate responsibility for determining if, and the degree to which, a SRC member must be recused from a particular assignment, and reasons will be documented in SRC meeting notes.