



# United States Department of the Interior



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## Memorandum

To: Northern Spotted Owl Recovery Plan Implementation Team and Other Interested Stakeholders

From: Paul Henson, Implementation Team Chair and State Supervisor, Oregon Fish and Wildlife Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Portland, Oregon  
*Paul Henson*

Subject: Revision of the Northern Spotted Owl Recovery Plan - Update

### Introduction

As many of you know, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has been awaiting a ruling from the U.S. District Court, District of Columbia, in the case, Carpenters Industrial Council, et al., v. Ken Salazar, Secretary of Interior, and U.S. Fish And Wildlife Service, on our request to remand the 2008 Recovery Plan for the Northern Spotted Owl (Plan) and the species' critical habitat. Our goal is respond to scientific peer review and to complete a targeted scientific revision of the Plan using the best available science including recent scientific information involving climate change and habitat modeling. After revising the Plan, we will consider potential changes to critical habitat.

The purpose of this letter is:

- To engage you in our decision to continue to move forward with addressing peer review comments and revise the Plan;
- To update you on the recovery actions that have been accomplished during the past 18 months or that are in various stages of completion; and
- To solicit the interest or involvement of you and your staffs, as appropriate, in this revision process.

### Overview of the Recovery Plan Revision Process

Completion of this revision process will be relatively quick. We will address the 2008 peer review comments received from The Wildlife Society, the Society for Conservation Biology, and

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the American Ornithologist's Union, and we are drafting revised Plan narrative. We will then request peer review from all persons or organizations that previously provided peer review on the 2008 Recovery Plan, assuming that they are available and can meet the timetable for revising Plan. We will also provide an opportunity for public review. A new final revised recovery plan will be completed after consideration of the peer review and public comments on the draft plan. We hope complete this process by the end of the calendar year; see the [attached table](#) for details on the proposed timeframe.

We will retain many aspects of the current Plan in the revised Plan, such as the strategy to assess and address threats from the barred owl. The revised recovery plan will primarily consider six topics: (a) adequacy of the reserves on the Westside of the Cascade Mountains, (b) lack of reserves on the Eastside of the Cascade Mountains, (c) adequacy of non-Federal lands' contribution to owl recovery, (d) adequacy of the dispersal habitat strategy, (e) protection of high quality habitat, (f) and protection of occupied spotted owl sites. We will also address implication of climate change on spotted owl conservation. These issues will be important in considering potential revisions to critical habitat.

#### Status of Work Groups and Update of Completed and Ongoing Actions

As a result of the recommendations of the 2008 Recovery Plan, the Service established several work groups to actively implement the recovery actions of that Plan. These work groups include:

- the Section 7 Work Group,
- the Klamath Province Work Group,
- the Dry Forest Landscape Work Group,
- the Barred Owl Work Group, and
- ad hoc non-federal lands work groups for each state.

The work groups' activities are implementing the 2008 Recovery Plan as well as aiding in the Plan revision process. The following is a summary of the respective groups' accomplishments to date.

*The Barred Owl Work Group:* This group is led by Jim Thraikill, field supervisor of the Service's Roseburg Field Office. The group has conducted an analysis that led to revising the FWS-accepted spotted owl survey protocol in light of the influence of barred owls on spotted owl vocalizations (Addresses Recovery Action 24). The draft 2010 Spotted Owl Survey Protocol was presented to the field in late February and early March in Washington, Oregon and California. The field seasons from 2010 through 2012 are transition years for protocol implementation, while comments are currently being requested and received on the draft of the protocol. A "Frequently Asked Questions" (FAQ) document will soon be distributed to provide clarification on the protocol and its transition phase.

This work group has also developed a survey approach specific to barred owls which has been field tested in a few select areas in 2009 (Addresses Recovery Action 23). These data are being summarized and will help inform barred owl density and site occupancy parameters. Field work examining the interactions of spotted and barred owls in the Oregon Coast Range has been completed under an umbrella of many partners lead by the U.S. Geological Survey, with results expected later this year.

In addition, Robin Bown is leading an effort by the Service to develop a draft EIS to assess the impacts of studying the experimental removal of barred owls in areas with spotted owls (Addresses Recovery Action 29). The Service requested scoping comments through January 12, 2010, and is now writing the draft EIS. We anticipate releasing a copy of the draft EIS to the public during the summer of 2010 summer. This work group helped refine the barred owl experimental removal NEPA process, including setting the scientific and social foundation for the EIS.

*The Klamath Province Work Group:* This work group's chair is Brian Woodbridge of the Service's Yreka Fish and Wildlife Office. The group has initiated a detailed NSO habitat modeling exercise that served as the precursor for the range-wide modeling effort we are currently working on (see below). Fire ecologists on this work group are concurrently developing models to predict the interaction of wildfire with spotted owl habitat suitability. Brian is one of the principal managers of the range-wide modeling effort described below (Addresses Recovery Action 8).

*The Dry Forest Landscape Work Group:* This group, led by Sue Livingston of the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Office, is addressing the on-going professional debate regarding the impact of forest fires on spotted owls and how to best manage the dry forest landscape in light of those potential threats. The group is scheduling a structured workshop in June to address this issue, which will allow them to proceed with assisting the Service in making recommendations for a management strategy in the dry forest provinces. These recommendations should contribute to spotted owl recovery while addressing other management goals such as fuels management and timber harvest (Addresses Recovery Actions 6, 7, 9, and 10).

*The Section 7 Work Group:* This group, led by Brendan White of the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Office, has met on an as-needed basis to clarify various questions associated with section 7 consultation and recovery plan implementation, such as Recovery Action 32.

*The Non-Federal Land Work Groups:* These groups are less formal than the other work groups and in some cases simply represent the ongoing coordination between the Service, State officials, and other interested local parties. Ken Hoffman is the Service lead in California; Bob Progulske is the Service lead for Oregon; and Ken Berg is the Service lead for Washington. Efforts in California have focused mainly on developing cooperative agreements with State and non-Federal land owners and managers to avoid spotted owl take during their management activities. Efforts in Oregon have focused on the development of a state-wide Safe Harbor Agreement to encourage non-Federal landowners to develop spotted owl habitat on their lands, and the exploration of carbon sequestration on non-Federal forest lands. Activities in Washington include participation on a broad-scale stakeholders group advising the State on incentives and mechanisms to help landowners to promote owl conservation and maintain economically viable and sustainable forestry.

#### Other Scientific Information to be Addressed in the Recovery Plan Revision

*Range-wide Modeling Effort:* As part of the habitat modeling effort first initiated by the Klamath Province Work Group, the Service has worked with partners to expand to a multi-step,

range-wide modeling process utilizing expert opinion from across the range of the spotted owl. This modeling process has four main steps:

1. Consult spotted owl experts throughout the range to determine what characteristics determine where on the landscape spotted owls nest;
2. Using these data, model predicted spotted owl occupancy across the species' range creating a range-wide map;
3. Using this map, use a model to assess efficient configurations of a spotted owl conservation block (reserve) network; and
4. Model the effectiveness of a subset of these conservation block scenarios to help determine which would most effectively lead to spotted owl recovery

We are currently nearing completion of the second step of this process and are heading into the third step, while actively preparing for the final step. Brendan White, Jim Thraikill, and Brian Woodbridge are Service contacts for this effort.

*Demographic Study:* The report on the demographic status and trends of the northern spotted owl is likely to be published soon. This information will be incorporated into the Plan revision.

*Climate Change:* One of the Service's top priorities – perhaps our greatest priority -- is mitigating the impacts of climate change. On September 14, 2009, the Secretary of the Interior issued Order No. 3289: *Addressing the Impacts of Climate Change on America's Water, Land, and Other Natural and Cultural Resources*. This Order established a Department-wide approach to addressing climate change and its related impacts on Service trust resources. Specifically, the Order directs us to analyze potential climate change impacts when undertaking long-range planning exercises, developing multi-year management plans, and making major decisions regarding potential use of resources under the Service's purview.

This recovery plan revision clearly falls under the purview of this Order. Recovery Action 33 directs us to "Assess how climate change may affect spotted owls and their habitat over time, and adjust protection and management of spotted owl habitat relative to these projected changes." The Plan also includes discussion of fire and climate change in Appendix E. But the Plan does not clearly address how mitigating for climate change overlays or, conversely, may conflict with spotted owl conservation measures. We hope to address this issue in the revised Plan and provide some preliminary guidance on how to imbed spotted owl conservation recommendations within a broader strategy of managing Pacific Northwest Forests to mitigate climate change impacts.

### Conclusion

We look forward to completing this recovery plan revision. We recognize that all of us have an important stake in the outcome of this process, and we will do our best to coordinate with all of you in an open, inclusive and transparent manner. We also hope you will support our effort to complete this process within the proposed timeframe so that we will have a defensible and practical product that will effectively meet its overall goal – to promote the conservation and recovery of the northern spotted owl.

On behalf of all the administrative units of the Service in the range of the owl, thank you!