

## Questions and Answers about the Northern Spotted Owl Draft Recovery Plan

**Q: What action is the Service taking?**

**A:** The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is releasing a draft recovery plan for the northern spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis caurina*) and announcing the opening of a 60-day public comment period.

**Q: What is a recovery plan?**

**A:** Under the Endangered Species Act, the Service is required to outline the goals and objectives that must be met in order to recover an endangered species. The guiding document, called a recovery plan, is a road map on how to help species recover.

**Q: Who wrote this recovery plan?**

**A:** The draft northern spotted owl recovery plan was prepared by the Service with the assistance of a Recovery Team representing federal agencies, state governments, the timber industry and the conservation community. The Recovery Team members served as independent advisors to the Service. This draft recovery plan does not necessarily represent the view or official position of any individual or organization – other than that of the Service – involved in the writing of the plan.

**Q: Why is the Service developing a recovery plan for the northern spotted owl now?**

**A:** A draft recovery plan for the northern spotted owl was originally published in 1992. The plan was not finalized due to the development of the Northwest Forest Plan, which was initiated in 1994 as the federal contribution to the recovery of the spotted owl. The Northwest Forest Plan amended 26 land and resource management plans of the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management (LRMPs). These LRMPs serve as the basis of conservation for a wide variety of other rare species. These LRMPs also provide a comprehensive strategy for managing 24.5 million acres of Forest Service and BLM lands to maintain and restore late-successional (old-growth) forests and maintain the economic structure of the region.

Recognizing the dynamic nature of forests and the need to adapt management techniques as conditions change, the final recovery plan will provide a northern spotted owl conservation strategy to assist the Forest Service and the BLM with future land-use plan revisions.

**Q: How does this draft recovery plan relate to the Northwest Forest Plan?**

**A:** The foundation of the recovery plan is based on the conservation principles first put forward in the 1990 report by the Interagency Scientific Committee to address conservation of the northern spotted owl. These principles were then carried forward in the Northwest Forest Plan, published in 1994. However, the

Northwest Forest Plan was created to address an entire late-successional forest ecosystem, not just the northern spotted owl. The Northwest Forest Plan did identify large conservation reserves benefiting rare and little known non-listed species, and amended the land and resource management plans that guide the management on each of the 19 National Forests and 7 Bureau of Land Management Districts across the range of the northern spotted owl.

The draft recovery plan differs from the Northwest Forest Plan in that it specifically defines recovery criteria, objectives and actions for the northern spotted owl.

**Q: What is the goal of the recovery plan for the northern spotted owl?**

**A:** The ultimate goal of this recovery plan is to recover the northern spotted owl so that it no longer requires the protection of Endangered Species Act.

**Q: What does the recovery plan say?**

**A:** The draft recovery plan contains recommendations to guide the activities needed to accomplish the recovery objectives and criteria. It presents 37 actions that address recovery through management of the key threats, which include competition with barred owls; maintenance and restoration of habitat; and monitoring of the population's status. The recovery plan also calls for the establishment of an inter-organizational Northern Spotted Owl Work Group to coordinate implementation of the plan.

**Q: What are the objectives for northern spotted owl recovery?**

**A:** There are three main objectives of this draft recovery plan:

- Spotted owl populations must be sufficiently large and widely distributed;
- Adequate habitat will be available for spotted owls and will continue to exist;
- Threats need to be reduced or eliminated so that spotted owl populations are stable or increasing and spotted owls are unlikely to become threatened again in the foreseeable future.

**Q: How will you know when northern spotted owls have recovered?**

**A:** The draft recovery plan establishes five criteria for assessing when the northern spotted owl has reached its recovery goals. When sufficient progress toward recovery has been made, a separate team will assess the spotted owl's status to determine whether delisting is appropriate. This subsequent review may be initiated without all of the recovery criteria in this draft recovery plan having been fully met. For example, one or more criteria may have been exceeded, while other criteria may not have been fully accomplished. In this instance, the Service may judge that, over all, the threats have been minimized sufficiently and the species is robust enough to be delisted from the Endangered Species Act.

A summary of the five main criteria identified in the draft recovery plan includes:

1. The percentage of known spotted owl territories occupied or influenced by barred owls is sufficiently low to allow stable or increasing populations and distribution of spotted owls;
2. The population trend is stable or increasing after 10 years of monitoring in each province, excluding Western Washington Lowlands, the Willamette Valley and California Cascades, where the number of spotted owls and the amount of federal land is too low to substantively contribute to recovery;
3. The distribution of spotted owls is such that in each of the three states at least 80 percent of the identified owl conservation areas contain at least 15 occupied spotted owl sites for five consecutive years;
4. In each province, excluding Western Washington Lowlands and the Willamette Valley, at least 80 percent of all owl conservation areas have reached a specified percentage of high-quality habitat. High quality habitat is defined as having the habitat-capable acres in a condition similar to that used by 90 percent of the spotted owl pairs for nesting and roosting in that province;
5. A post-delisting monitoring plan is ready for implementation with the states of Washington, Oregon and California.

**Q: What is the population goal for northern spotted owls to be considered recovered?**

**A:** The Service did not set a specific population level as a criteria or goal to achieve recovery in the draft recovery plan. The most important factor to consider in managing populations of northern spotted owls is the trends of where owls are increasing or decreasing. Restoring depleted populations and stabilizing owls so they are well-distributed across their range will ensure a sufficient genetic interchange and resistance to acute, catastrophic events.

**Q: How many acres of forest will be protected for the northern spotted owl?**

**A:** Recovery plans are not regulatory documents and do not establish protected areas. Rather, the conservation blocks described in both options of the draft recovery plan identify the areas the Service believes are important to achieve recovery, and are essentially the areas where the Service will look to see if the recovery criteria have been met.

Option 1 identifies over 7.7 million acres of federal land in its Managed Owl Conservation Area network. There are many possible iterations of implementing the habitat rule set provided in option 2. The iteration provided in the draft plan for illustrative purposes identifies nearly 7 million acres of federal land.

**Q: What are the threats to northern spotted owls?**

**A:** The draft recovery plan recognizes the primary threat to northern spotted owls as competition with barred owls. This threat has only recently become evident. The other range-wide threats affecting spotted owls are loss of habitat amount and distribution as a result of past activities and disturbances (including fire), and

ongoing habitat loss as a result of timber harvest, although timber harvest has been greatly reduced on federal lands.

In 1990, the spotted owl was listed as a threatened species because of widespread loss and adverse modification of suitable habitat across the owl's entire range and the inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms to conserve the owl. More specifically, habitat loss was a result of timber harvesting and was further exacerbated by catastrophic events such as fire, volcanic eruption and wind storms.

**Q: Where are barred owls from and why are they a threat to northern spotted owls? Why weren't they a more significant threat when the northern spotted owl was listed under the Endangered Species Act?**

**A:** Barred owls (*Strix varia*) are native to eastern North American, but progressively moved west as human activities altered the landscape and suitable habitat became available. One theory is that European settlement and the cessation of Native American burning of the plains allowed forests to grow, providing the barred owl with suitable habitat. Since barred owls are generalists in the habitat they select and the prey they feed upon, they are outcompeting northern spotted owls for habitat and food, causing spotted owl populations to decline. At the time the northern spotted owl was listed in 1990, little was known about the threat posed by barred owls. Since then, we have learned much more about this threat and the draft recovery plan reflects that new information.

**Q. How will the Service control competition with barred owls?**

**A:** The threat from barred owls requires immediate action. This urgency is stressed in the recovery plan, as actions associated with addressing barred owls were the only actions to be given recovery priority number 1, meaning the action "*must be taken to prevent extinction or prevent the species from declining irreversibly in the foreseeable future.*" As there are still many unknowns associated with the mechanisms of how interactions with barred owls threaten spotted owls and how those threats can be controlled, the recovery plan proposes several actions to address the threat range-wide. A key proposed action is the formation of a Barred Owl Working Group to coordinate barred owl research and control among federal, state and private partners across the spotted owl's range. Given the urgency of the threat, the recovery plan also proposes a draft barred owl removal strategy.

**Q: How will the Service protect northern spotted owl habitat?**

**A:** In addition to describing specific actions to address the barred owl threat, the draft recovery plan continues to recognize the importance of habitat for the long-term survival of the spotted owl. Designating appropriate habitat for spotted owls can be achieved in different ways and this draft recovery plan presents two options.

The two options contain many similarities. Both options share the following characteristics:

- They are based on the same underlying science;

- Use the same information on owl dispersal and habitat needs and population dynamics;
- Contain essentially the same recovery goal, objectives, criteria and actions;
- Address the threat from barred owls in the same way;
- Address the issues associated with fire;
- Recognize the continuing importance of maintaining suitable habitat for the spotted owl;
- Rely on federal lands to provide the primary contribution for northern spotted owl recovery.

The options differ in the following ways: Option 1 maps the specific conservation area boundaries where most of the recovery actions and criteria will be targeted. These conservation areas are called Managed Owl Conservation Areas, or MOCAs. The MOCAs are mapped in the draft recovery plan and are intended to be mostly static on the land, though minor adjustments to the boundaries are anticipated and would be consistent with the plan.

Option 2 provides flexibility to land managers to ensure sufficient habitat capable of supporting the fundamental needs (i.e., nesting, roosting, foraging and dispersal) of the northern spotted owl but does not designate specific conservation area boundaries. Rather, it provides a set of rules that defines the size and distance of the conservation areas needed for recovery, while recognizing that the habitat demands of the northern spotted owl vary across its range. However, for illustrative purposes, Option 2 includes a map showing how the rule set could be applied on the landscape and what such an application might look like. The rule set is designed to help guide the federal land management agencies when undertaking conservation actions for the northern spotted owl. The flexibility to identify the conservation areas based on provincial, ecological and management situations, as well as natural disturbances (e.g., catastrophic fire) is intended to ensure the effectiveness and ability to successfully implement this recovery plan.

This draft plan should be considered as an options document on which the Service is specifically asking for comment on both options.

**Q: How do the Managed Owl Conservation Areas compare to the reserves established by the Northwest Forest Plan?**

**A:** In Option 1, the draft recovery plan recommends specific management actions both inside and outside of the MOCAs that are based on existing federal land use allocations, regulatory frameworks and standards and guidelines from the Land Resource Management Plans of the Forest Service and BLM. MOCAs represent areas that contain or will develop habitat considered essential for spotted owl recovery and are almost entirely overlaid on LRMP reserves. Management of these key areas to support stable or increasing spotted owl populations is the heart of the recovery strategy. The MOCAs are likely to support stable and well-distributed populations of spotted owls, as long as provisions are in place to

ensure that sufficient suitable habitat is maintained, and the threat from barred owls is reduced to an acceptable level. Two types of MOCAs are identified: MOCA 1s, which are capable of supporting 20 or more pairs of spotted owls, and MOCA 2s, which are capable of supporting 1–19 pairs of spotted owls.

The Recovery Plan also identifies Conservation Support Areas, which are areas between or adjacent to MOCAs, where habitat contributions by private, state, and Federal lands are expected to increase the likelihood of spotted owl recovery.

**Q: Why two options in the recovery plan? Is this precedent setting?**

**A:** There are multiple ways to recover a species and especially with such a far-ranging, complex species, the Service is interested in generating the widest possible discussion about the best way to recover the northern spotted owl. This is the first time a recovery plan has included more than one option for achieving recovery.

**Q: What is the impact of northern spotted owl recovery on federal lands?**

**A:** Recovery of the spotted owl is expected to be achieved almost exclusively on federal lands, and recovery actions for the northern spotted owl in the draft recovery plan focus primarily on federal lands.

**Q: What is the impact of northern spotted owl recovery on non-federal lands? What does it mean for state, tribal and private lands?**

**A:** Non-federal lands are important to the range-wide goal of achieving conservation and recovery of the spotted owl. The Service's primary expectations for non-federal lands are for their contributions to demographic support (pair or cluster protection) to federal lands or their connectivity with federal lands. In addition, timber harvest within each state is governed by rules that provide protection of spotted owls or their habitat.

**Q: Will the draft recovery plan impose any restrictions on what can be done on non-federal lands?**

**A:** No. Recovery plans are not regulatory documents and do not impose any restrictions on management activities.

**Q: How long will it take to recover northern spotted owls?**

**A:** Provided that funds are available to accomplish the required recovery actions, it is believed recovery could be achieved in as little as 30 years if the recovery plan is fully implemented and the actions are successful. We acknowledge there is significant uncertainty surrounding this estimate. The timeline is based on the development of sufficient habitat and successful management of the barred owl.

**Q: How much will it cost to recover the northern spotted owl?**

**A:** The estimated cost to recover the northern spotted owl and remove it from the list of threatened and endangered species is approximately \$198 million over 30 years.

**Q: When will a final recovery plan be ready?**

**A:** This draft plan should be considered as an options document on which the Service is specifically asking for comment. We are soliciting public comment for 60 days, until June 25, 2007. The Service must then review all comments and determine what changes should be made to the plan before finalizing it. It is expected a final recovery plan will be produced sometime in April 2008.

**Q: How does the Recovery Plan relate to BLM's Western Oregon Plans Revision process and the Critical Habitat Rule?**

**A:** The draft recovery plan provides recovery criteria, objectives and actions specific to the northern spotted owl. It is hoped the Draft Recovery Plan will help guide all Federal efforts to recover the northern spotted owl including, if the timing permits, the BLM's Western Oregon Plan Revisions and the revision to the northern spotted owl critical habitat.

**Q: Will the draft recovery plan be peer reviewed?**

**A:** Yes. The Notice of Availability highlights specific questions the Service is seeking comment on from the public. Through the comment process, the Service will also seek review from a range of scientific peers on these questions and the overall plan. The Service will ensure key scientists receive copies of the draft plan and are given the opportunity to provide comments. Scientific reviews received will help ensure the recovery plan is based on the best available science and critical thinking.

**Q: How can I get the draft recovery plan?**

**A:** Hard copies or CDs of the draft recovery plan will be available by request from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Regional Office, 911 NE 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Portland, Oregon, 97232 (telephone: 503-231-2194). An electronic copy of the draft recovery plan is also available at:  
<http://www.fws.gov/pacific/ecoservices/endangered/recovery/plans.html>

**Q: Can I comment on the draft recovery plan?**

**A:** Yes. Under the Endangered Species Act, the Service is required to notify the public about the development of a recovery plan and provide an opportunity for review and comment. We will consider all information presented during the public comment period. Substantive comments on the recovery needs of the species or other aspects of recovery plan development may result in changes to the recovery plan. Substantive comments regarding recovery plan implementation may not necessarily result in changes to the recovery plan, but will be forwarded to appropriate federal agencies or other entities so that they can take these comments into account during the course of implementing recovery actions. Individual responses to comments will not be provided.

The Service is also holding four public meetings – one each in Washington and California, and two in Oregon – to solicit comments on the recovery plan. The Service will provide a brief presentation on the draft recovery plan and will take comments from the public. There will be smaller breakout rooms in which

specific questions will be answered. Public meetings are not required for recovery plan comment sessions, and these will not be public hearings in which comments will be provided on the record. Rather, these meetings will be informative listening sessions for all involved. All meetings will be from 6:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. The meetings are scheduled for:

- **May 22, 2007, Roseburg, Oregon:** Douglas County Fairgrounds Complex Conference Hall, 2110 SW Frear Street;
- **May 23, 2007, Redding, California:** Redding Convention Center, 700 Auditorium Drive;
- **May 30, 2007, Portland, Oregon:** Oregon Convention Center, Portland Ballroom, 777 Northeast Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd.; and
- **May 31, 2007, Lacey, Washington:** St. Martin's University, Norman Worthington Conference Center, 5300 Pacific Ave. SE.

Persons with disabilities needing reasonable accommodations to participate in the public meetings are invited to contact Angela Butsch at 1-888-812-5759 (voice) or 503-231-6263 (TTY), or [angela\\_butsch@fws.gov](mailto:angela_butsch@fws.gov). Reasonable accommodation requests should be received at least 3 business days prior to the meeting to help ensure availability; 2 weeks notice is requested for ASL/ESL interpreter needs.

**Q: How will public comments be used in the process?**

**A:** As with any public comment process the Service conducts, we will consider all comments received. Given that a large number of comments are expected, the Service will group similar comments.

Through this process of grouping comments, new information and insights may surface. In this framework, public comments serve an important role, as with scientific review, to ensure the recovery plan is based on the best available science and critical thinking.