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News Release



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Northern Spotted Owl Recovery Plan Released

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today released a final recovery plan for the northern spotted owl that identifies criteria and actions needed to stop the owl's decline, reduce threats and return the species to a stable, well-distributed population in Washington, Oregon and California. The northern spotted owl is protected as a threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act.

"After extensive scientific review and public comment, we have significantly revised our 2007 draft to create a long-term strategy, including a detailed roadmap for the next 10 years, for recovering the northern spotted owl to the point it no longer needs federal protection," said Ren Lohofener, director of the Service's Pacific Region. "This plan aggressively addresses each of the key threats with sound and, in some cases, pioneering recommendations."

Developed over two years with help from scores of scientists, a recovery team of diverse experts, and an interagency group of biologists, the plan envisions recovery of the northern spotted owl could be achieved in 30 years at a cost of about \$489 million. However, many of the actions in the plan are given only a 10-year lifespan, Lohofener noted, due to the uncertainties associated with the threat from barred owls and the severe unpredictable risk of fire, especially in the dry eastern portion of the spotted owl's range, generally east of the Cascade Mountains' crest. Recovery actions will be monitored closely for effectiveness and revised if needed.

"There are always uncertainties involved with such a wide-ranging species facing complex threats," Lohofener said. "Given the species' continued decline, in some areas at a faster rate than was predicted, we need to ensure we are truly on a path to recovery as we implement the plan."

The recovery plan identifies the primary threats facing the northern spotted owl as current and past habitat loss due to harvest and catastrophic fire, and competition from the barred owl. It describes 34 recovery actions to address these threats. The main elements of the recovery strategy are:

- A network of 133 owl conservation areas totaling nearly 6.4 million acres of federal land west of the Cascade Mountains' crest in Washington, Oregon and California is identified. The goal of the conservation areas is to support a stable number of breeding pairs of northern spotted owls over time and allow for their movement across this network.
- On the arid east side of the owl's range, generally east of the Cascades' crest, a pioneering approach to habitat management is described, based on strong recommendations from leading spotted owl experts and fire ecologists. The east side is dominated by a severe natural disturbance pattern so defining static conservation areas, like on the west side, is not useful, as these areas will inevitably and unpredictably be destroyed by fire or insect damage. Our recommended approach calls for maintaining shifting spotted owl habitat patches in an entire landscape that is managed to maintain the building blocks needed for spotted owl habitat, such as large, older trees. As individual habitat patches are lost to fire or insect damage, we can quickly look to the neighboring areas to develop into our next habitat patch.
- To better understand the impact of barred owls on spotted owls and to start addressing this threat, the recovery plan calls for large-scale barred owl control experiments in key spotted owl areas.
- Further, the plan looks to federal land managers to maintain older, complex forests on federal lands west of the Cascades' crest. This land is in addition to the designated conservation areas and is meant as an interim measure to help buffer the barred owl threat while we learn how to address it. Barred owls are native to eastern North America but moved west in the last century. Barred owls are aggressively territorial, have an extremely diverse diet and can tolerate different habitat conditions, so are outcompeting northern spotted owls for habitat and food.
- The plan calls for the development of an inter-organizational work group responsible for overseeing implementation of the plan, including managing subgroups on barred owls and implementation of the eastside landscape management approach.
- The plan encourages incentives to non-federal landowners to contribute to northern spotted owl recovery through land management.

“Recovering a species takes time and significant effort from multiple parties,” Lohofener said. “The recovery plan relies primarily on activities conducted on federal lands, but obviously, recovery is achieved best and most quickly with a team effort.”

The recovery plan envisions recovery will be achieved – and the owl may be delisted – when there is a stable or increasing population, well-distributed across the owl's range, for at least 10 years and the threats from the barred owl have been reduced or eliminated.

Recovery plans are not regulatory documents enforceable by law. Rather, they provide guidance to bring about recovery through prescribed management actions and criteria to determine when recovery has been achieved, and are often influential in guiding the land-use decisions of federal and non-federal land managers.

The northern spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis caurina*) inhabits structurally complex forests from British Columbia through the Cascade Mountains and coastal ranges in Washington, Oregon and California as far south as Marin County. The U.S. population of the owl was listed as a threatened species on June 26, 1990, 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. A draft recovery plan for the northern spotted owl was completed in 1992 but not finalized due to the development of the Northwest Forest Plan, which amended 26 land and resource management plans (LRMPs) of the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management. These LRMPs serve as the basis of conservation for a wide variety of species, including the northern spotted owl. The draft recovery plan released today builds on the Forest Plan and solely addresses the recovery needs of the northern spotted owl.

The Final Recovery Plan for the Northern Spotted Owl and supporting documents are located at <http://www.fws.gov/pacific/ecoservices/endangered/recovery/NSORecoveryPlanning.htm>

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