

News Release



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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Invites Public Review Of Draft Revision to the Northern Spotted Owl Recovery Plan

A draft revision to the 2008 Northern Spotted Owl Recovery Plan is available for a 60-day public review period, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today. The proposed refinements will help the agency better address the Pacific Northwest forest dweller's current threats and recovery needs. The northern spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis caurina*) was listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act in 1990 and continues to decline.

The draft revision is not an overhaul of the existing recovery plan but includes significant refinements based on scientific and technological advancements, especially related to evaluating suitable habitat.

"In the early years after the spotted owl was protected under the Endangered Species Act, we anticipated that it would take decades to make up for the habitat that has been lost over the last 100 or more years," said Robyn Thorson, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Pacific Regional Director. "The progress federal partners have made in establishing more ecological and diversified forest management practices since the spotted owl was listed has helped to reduce its decline, but we're certainly not out of the woods yet."

The 2008 recovery plan identified past and current habitat loss as well as competition from barred owls as the most significant threats to the owl's continued survival. The barred owl, a larger, more aggressive and adaptable relative from eastern North America, has progressively moved into the same range, disrupting and displacing spotted owls.

The most recent analysis of data on demographics such as occupancy, survival, reproduction, and movement indicates that the spotted owl continues to decline in seven of 11 study areas throughout its range in Washington, Oregon, and California (populations are considered stationary in the other four). The overall rangewide population is declining at an average rate of nearly 3 percent per year.

"The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's ultimate goal in this revision is to produce a recovery plan that is scientifically sound and durable, has widespread support among varied stakeholders, and will promote spotted owl recovery in a timely and cost-effective manner," said Paul Henson, State Supervisor of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Oregon Fish and Wildlife Office and the agency's lead for spotted owl recovery. "The proposed revision is a solid step in this direction, and we invite public comments to help us improve the plan even further."

For more information, visit www.fws.gov/oregonfwo to view the Fish and Wildlife Service's "Notice of Availability" for the draft revision, which provides a summary of the agency's proposed changes; the full recovery plan document including the proposed changes, and additional background information on spotted owl recovery.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals, and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov

Supplemental Questions and Answers about the Draft Revision to the Northern Spotted Owl Recovery Plan

What is a recovery plan?

Under the Endangered Species Act, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife 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.

Recovery plans describe actions considered necessary for the conservation of the species, establish criteria for downlisting or delisting listed species, and estimate time and cost for implementing the measures needed for recovery. Recovery means the status of the species is improved to the point that it no longer requires Endangered Species Act protections.

Unlike critical habitat designations, which are another key requirement of the Endangered Species Act, recovery plans are non-regulatory and do not impose restrictions on management activities.

The history of recovery planning in the case of the northern spotted owl is unique. After it was listed as threatened in 1990 and critical habitat was originally designated in 1992, the Northwest Forest Plan was developed in 1994 as a broad conservation framework to address the needs of several Northwest forest-dependent species, including the spotted owl. Part of that framework was a network of reserves that classified forestlands in different ways to guide federal land management and protection measures.

Most recovery plans do not include reserve networks or special land protection classifications. However, it is not uncommon for recovery plans to identify areas of habitat that are considered important to achieve recovery, and areas the agency will evaluate for progress on meeting recovery criteria.

Why is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service revising the northern spotted owl recovery plan?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service published the Recovery Plan for the Northern Spotted Owl and announced its availability in the *Federal Register* May 21, 2008. It formed the basis for our revised designation of spotted owl critical habitat, which was published in the *Federal Register* on August 13, 2008. Both the 2008 revised critical habitat designation and the 2008 recovery plan were challenged in court. In addition, on December 15, 2008, the Inspector General of the Department of the Interior issued a report which concluded that the integrity of the agency decision-making process for the spotted owl recovery plan was potentially jeopardized by improper political influence. As a result, the federal government filed a motion in the lawsuit on July 30, 2009 for voluntary remand of the 2008 recovery plan and critical habitat designation. On September 1, 2010, the court issued an opinion remanding the 2008 recovery plan to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for issuance of a revised plan within 9 months. The court also indicated that it will remand the 2008 critical habitat designation pending resolution of a schedule for a new rulemaking.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service already had begun revising the 2008 recovery plan while awaiting court action. The draft revision to the recovery plan announced today addresses impartial peer review the agency received from leading scientific organizations in the conservation community shortly after the recovery plan was released in May 2008.

The peer review, compiled by The Wildlife Society, the American Ornithologists' Union, and The Society for Conservation Biology, raised concerns about the adequacy of the recovery plan. It is not uncommon for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to receive peer review of our scientific and policy decisions, and in this case, we thought the issues raised were legitimate and compelling enough to warrant further consideration.

The agency moved forward with implementing the existing 2008 recovery plan while developing refinements to address scientific and legal concerns. Collaborative work groups of representatives with diverse perspectives and expertise were organized shortly after the recovery plan was finalized to guide recovery efforts. Including representatives from government agencies, states, tribes, industry, environmental organizations, and academic institutions, these work groups also were tapped to develop specific parts of the draft revision.

What are the main recommendations in the draft revision to the northern spotted owl recovery plan?

The main recommendations include:

- **Conducting a comprehensive analysis of suitable habitat.** This involves a new synthesis of more than 20 years worth of research and applying it to the latest scientific mapping technologies. The analysis will better determine where owls are likely to survive over the long term, allowing for clearer predictions on how land management strategies and other conservation measures will contribute to recovery.
- **Conserving more high quality habitat and occupied habitat.** This recommendation provides more specificity on what constitutes high quality habitat and stronger protection for those areas, especially where owls presently reside.
- **Withdrawing the “Managed Owl Conservation Areas” recommendation included in the 2008 plan and continuing to rely on the reserve strategy laid out in the Northwest Forest Plan.** After the comprehensive habitat analysis is completed, and depending upon final instruction from the court, the agency may revise the owl’s designated critical habitat. If appropriate, the agency would develop an updated reserve strategy to align with the new critical habitat designation.
- **Affirming recommendations in the 2008 recovery plan advocating active forest management.** This includes fuels treatment, thinning, and forest restoration on both the east and west sides of the Cascade Mountains’ crest, to enhance habitat and reduce potential impacts from fire.
- Re-evaluating the potential contribution of state and private lands to spotted owl recovery in areas where federal lands are limited; and working with partners throughout the owl’s range to develop economic incentives for habitat conservation measures on non-federal lands.
- Incorporating new scientific information to further address the implications of climate change on spotted owl conservation.

What does the comprehensive habitat analysis for the northern spotted owl entail?

The comprehensive habitat analysis is fundamental to our future progress in recovering the northern spotted owl. It will provide the most thorough analysis of habitat quality across the range of the owl since it was listed under the Endangered Species Act 20 years ago. Ultimately, we’ll be able to combine new mapping capabilities with information from decades of dedicated monitoring by the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and other field researchers in both the public and private sectors.

The draft revision provides the results of the first phase of the habitat analysis, consisting of rangewide maps showing different levels of habitat quality. By the end of the year, when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service plans to finalize the recovery plan revision, the agency will have had the opportunity to apply many years worth of data on owl demographics (such as survival and reproductive success) to various habitat models to project population trends under different scenarios.

These scenarios would not only help predict how spotted owls would fare under various land management strategies but also what could happen with further encroachment of barred owls into the spotted owl’s range, or if that threat were removed. The barred owl, a larger, more aggressive and adaptable relative from eastern North America, has progressively moved into the same range, disrupting and displacing spotted owls. Because of what scientists have learned in recent years about the significant threat from barred owls, addressing the spotted owl’s habitat needs, while still very important, is only part of the solution.

What is the status of the northern spotted owl population?

The most significant threats to the northern spotted owl are past and current habitat loss (as a result of timber harvest and further exacerbated by catastrophic fire, volcanic eruption, and wind storms), and competition with barred owls. Little was known about

the barred owl threat at the time the spotted owl was listed in 1990. Since that time we have learned much more and the existing 2008 recovery plan reflects that newer information.

The most recent analysis of data on spotted owl demographics such as occupancy, survival, reproduction, and movement indicates that spotted owl populations continue to decline in seven of 11 study areas throughout the owl's range in Washington, Oregon, and California (populations are considered stationary in the other four). The overall rangewide population is declining at an average rate of nearly 3 percent per year.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service did not set a specific population level as a criteria or goal to achieve recovery. The most important factors to consider in assessing populations of spotted owls are the trends in areas where owls are increasing or decreasing and their geographic distribution. Restoring depleted populations and stabilizing owls so that they are well-distributed across their range will ensure a sufficient genetic interchange and resistance to acute, catastrophic events.

What progress has been made under the existing 2008 northern spotted owl recovery plan?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service continues to implement most of the 34 recovery actions described in the 2008 northern spotted owl recovery plan. Recently completed and forthcoming recovery actions include:

- A statewide Safe Harbor Agreement with the Oregon Department of Forestry and the Natural Resources Conservation Service to encourage conservation measures for the spotted owl on non-federal lands (announced 9/3/10);
- An upcoming draft Environmental Impact Statement on experimental removal of barred owls from certain areas where they are displacing spotted owls to see what effects removal would have on spotted owls; and
- Proposed revisions to the spotted owl survey protocol to improve monitoring efforts in light of the barred owl's presence.

The most fundamental accomplishment—which is ongoing—is collaboration among government agencies, states, tribes, industry, environmental organizations, and academic institutions. Representatives serve on work groups, management teams, and a scientific review committee—all overseen by an inter-organizational recovery plan implementation team—to guide recovery plan implementation and best incorporate new data. Pooling diverse perspectives, expertise, and resources and channeling that toward the spotted owl's greatest recovery needs gives us the best chance for success.