

Mexican Spotted Owl Recovery Plan Frequently Asked Questions

Q: When was the Mexican spotted owl listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA)?

A: The Mexican spotted owl was protected as a threatened species on March 16, 1993.

Q: What action is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) taking?

A: The Service is making available to the public the final, signed revised Recovery Plan. The original Mexican Spotted Owl Recovery Plan has been in effect since 1995; this would replace that plan.

Q: Why did the Service revise the Mexican Spotted Owl Recovery Plan?

A: The ESA requires the development of recovery plans for listed species, unless such a plan would not promote the conservation of a particular species. In the years since the 1995 Recovery Plan was written, the Service has learned a great deal about the owl's needs, the threats it faces, and some difficulties in implementing the original management and monitoring recommendations. This revised plan incorporates the appropriate new information.

Q: Is this plan based on the best available science?

A: Yes. The Plan includes specific recovery objectives and criteria to be met in order to enable us to remove this species from the list of endangered and threatened wildlife and plants. This Plan, based on the best available science, was produced by a recovery team which included researchers from the Forest Service's Rocky Mountain Research Station, the Service, as well as other federal and state agency representatives, and representatives from the Regional and Central Offices of CONANP in Mexico, covering the entire range of the subspecies.

Q: What will be the result of this plan on forest management?

A: Combinations of mechanical and prescribed fire treatments may be used to minimize risk of high-severity fire effects while striving to maintain or improve habitat conditions for the owl and its prey. These active forest management techniques will likely increase resistance to insects and disease, as well as enhance forest productivity and vigor, which will help maintain populations of not only the owl, but its prey and other forest-dependent species.

Landscape-level forest restoration, opening up more forest to treatments as this plan does, should provide economic opportunity and jobs with increased wood products becoming available. Nothing in the plan says that any area is necessarily hands-off. This will be determined on a case by case basis.

Q: What is different in the revised Recovery Plan from the 1995 plan?

A: In addition to incorporating new information on Mexican spotted owl biology, revision of the ecological management units, refined recovery criteria, a threats analysis, and a survey protocol, the revised Recovery Plan has three major differences from the original (1995) recovery plan. These are:

- Switching from mark-recapture population monitoring to occupancy monitoring which, while not as robust, is much more feasible (and less expensive) to implement since capturing and banding owls is not required;
- Using Forest Inventory Assessment data from the U.S. Forest Service for monitoring habitat trends, which is essentially cost-free; and
- Conducting forest restoration within and around occupied sites (called Protected Activity Centers or PACs) to help protect Mexican spotted owls from the impacts of wild fires. The revised plan recommends creating gaps in the tree canopy to slow the spread of fire from crown to crown. Crown fires are the ones that kill the trees, so the idea is that fire racing through the crowns hits the gaps and drops back to the ground, therefore allowing greater tree survival in the PACs where Mexican spotted owls occur.

Q: What impact do severe wildfires have on the Mexican spotted owl?

A: It's important to note that forest fires burn unevenly, and until the smoke clears the Service does not know how many of the involved PACs are severely burned versus those that received only light burning. The Service believes, however, these massive wildfires of the last decade or so serve to illustrate that managing for healthy and resilient forests is important for managing the owl to recovery, for all forest-dwelling wildlife, and for human safety and property protection.

Q: Where is the Mexican spotted owl found?

A: This Mexican spotted owl is found in the states of Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, and Utah, south through the Sierra Madre Occidental and Sierra Madre Oriental in Mexico. The species nests and roosts in forested areas exhibiting multilayered, uneven-aged tree structure, and in steep, rocky canyon lands. Forested habitats used by the owl vary throughout its range and by activity (nesting, roosting, foraging, dispersal/migration). However, the forest types believed most important to Mexican spotted owls are mixed conifer, pine-oak, and riparian habitats.

Q: What is the main threat to the Mexican spotted owl?

A: Threats to the owl's population in the United States have transitioned from commercial-based timber harvest at the time of listing, which created a more open and even-aged forest structure than believed compatible with spotted owl nesting and roosting, to the primary risk of stand-replacing wildfire. The revised recovery plan recommends protection of currently occupied home ranges, plus development of replacement nesting/roosting habitat over time. The plan recognizes the need to manage these forest landscapes to minimize the effects of large, stand-replacing wildfires, believed to be the greatest current threat to the species.

Q: Does this recovery plan place mandatory restrictions on human activity?

A: Recovery plans are prepared for federally listed threatened or endangered species. They outline conservation strategies, provide recovery criteria, identify partners, and include an implementation schedule of recovery actions with suggested timelines and estimated costs. The recovery criteria form the basis from which to gauge the species' recovery and subsequent risk of extinction. Recovery plans do not regulate federal agencies or their partners, but recovery plans are often adopted by federal agencies as sound environmental policy. Recovery plans do not obligate private landowners to implement the plan, and their cooperation is fully voluntary.