

## **Making a Good Restoration Project Event Better**

### ***Yreka FWO and Klamath National Forest Team Up to Improve Spotted Owl habitat***

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In the early 1900s, timber companies along the rugged California-Oregon border built railroad lines directly into forests, which made it easier to transport logs to area lumber mills. Many forests in the area were extensively harvested. According to one estimate, approximately 90 percent of the trees on the landscape were removed. Since the railroad logging era ended, forested stands have regenerated without any significant fire events. The result is what exists there today: dense-second growth stands dominated by smaller diameter trees.

The U.S Fish and Wildlife Service's Yreka Fish and Wildlife Office and the U.S. Forest Service's Klamath National Forest recently began to implement a project that will improve some of these stands, which is important habitat for the northern spotted owl.

The project is known as the Mt. Ashland Late Successional Reserve (LSR). The primary objectives of the project are to promote the development of late-successional and northern spotted owl habitat in second-growth stands and reduce the threat of stand-replacing wildfire.

Though far from being completed, the Mt. Ashland LSR has already proven to be a restoration success. But it is also a story of how two government agencies, from two different departments, with two different missions, got together willingly to make a good restoration project even better.

"Each agency recognized that there was a unique role to play," explained **Karen West** of the Klamath National Forest. "By working together we knew we could come up with a better plan – one that offers clear benefits to the forest and wildlife, but also one that benefits the public."

West noted that there will be less risk of catastrophic forest fire, which can cause harm to people and private property, and costs taxpayers millions of dollars. West also said that the Mt. Ashland LSR may also help the Fish and Wildlife Service move a step closer to the long term goal of recovering the northern spotted owl from the list of threatened species.

### **LSRs 101**

LSRs have their origins in the Northwest Forest Plan, a Clinton-era proposal that calls for managing national forests from northern California to Washington State in a way that benefits both wildlife and human interests. The LSR network was designed to provide a

functional, interconnected, late-successional forest ecosystem throughout the range of the northern spotted owl, with each LSR providing a specific role. LSRs are allocations within a large swath of forested landscape. In other words, they are forests within a larger forest. LSRs make for good habitat for spotted owls and other animals. LSRs are characterized by older, larger trees; standing dead trees; and dead trees on the ground. They also contain younger forests of differing age and characteristics.

The network of LSRs are located where they so they can provide connectivity for the owls, which makes it easier for owls to locate good habitat when dispersing – moving from one territory to another. Each LSR in the network is expected to provide enough habitat to support large population clusters of owls. The Mt. Ashland LSR currently supports 12-14 pairs of owls, while the objective is 20.

Soon after the LSRs were designated in the Northwest Forest Plan, it became clear to officials at the Forest Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service that some of the LSRs were either not meeting intended objectives for owl pairs, or they were at significant risk from wildfire, which could devastate the LSRs.

Because agency resources were limited, treating all the LSRs in the Klamath National Forest was not practical. So in 2004, personnel from these two agencies got together on their own to begin a collaborative process. They wanted to determine which LSR had the greatest need and which LSRs would exhibit the best expected outcome from treatments. Based on extensive reviews of existing data on stand conditions and field verification, the two agencies agreed to move forward with a project in the Mt. Ashland LSR.

“Once we had a concept on how to improve the forest, we shared it with the public, timber companies, and environmental organizations,” said **Dave Johnson**, a Yreka FWO biologist who has worked extensively on the project. “We held meetings and hosted field trips for stakeholders so we could explain to them what we wanted to do.”

The public comments were then used to develop the final plan for managing the LSR, which called for thinning second-growth stands to variable densities, which will reduce competition for water, sun, and nutrients. This, in turn, will help to increase the growth of individual trees and ultimately improve the overall health of the forest.

Thinning will also reduce the risk of stand-replacing fire. Small, understory trees can act as “ladder fuels.” Should a fire occur in the presence of these trees, it can potentially work its way up into the canopy of the tallest trees in the stand. This results in what is known as a “crown fire.” During crown fires, flames can spread from tree-top to tree-top and, if winds are strong enough, more fires could be ignited elsewhere.

Such an episode could devastate spotted owl habitat. The idea then is to restore the forest to more natural conditions so if there is a fire, the chance of it being catastrophic is lessened.

## **Implementing the Plan**

After the requisite public meetings on the Mt. Ashland LSR, an Environmental Impact Statement was agreed to and the Klamath National Forest signed the Record of Decision in May 2008. Since then, contractors have been sending crews into the forest for much of the year to mark with blue spray paint those trees that should be removed. The crew hopes to conclude the tree marking before heavy snowfalls. Otherwise, they will resume in the spring.

By next summer, the Forest Service is expected to hold the first of the timber sales on the LSR. Timber companies can bid on a stand of trees and it will be their responsibility to remove trees that have the blue markings. Once the trees are removed, another crew will go into the forest and conduct underburns to remove the fuels on the forest floor.

Johnson has been in the forest monitoring the activities of the marking crew throughout the summer and fall. He is carrying out a small part of the overall plan. Yet it is perhaps the most critical step in the entire process – making sure the right trees are being marked.

“The crew is doing a good job, and I am confident that their mark will meet our objectives,” said Johnson.

### **Working as a Team**

The primary legacy of the Mt. Ashland LSR project will be the significant improvements that will occur in the forest. More late-successional habitat will be created over time and a healthier, more natural forest will eventually take root. This will help spotted owls and it will also lessen the risk of catastrophic wildfire.

But there is another legacy – smaller, but also important. In many instances when two government agencies work together on matters of public interest or public policy, they do so because Congress or some other authority mandates it. There are plenty of reasons for this, but mostly it helps to ensure essential communications among agencies that often have overlapping, cross-jurisdictional, or entirely different missions.

The Mt. Ashland LSR project can stand as a reminder that government-to-government cooperation does not necessarily equate to more bureaucracy and inefficiencies.

In this case, the opposite happened: the agencies got creative. Despite limited funds and other challenges, the Klamath National Forest and the Yreka Fish and Wildlife Office voluntarily joined together, pooled resources and expertise, and implemented an efficient, far-reaching conservation program that will pay dividends to people, wildlife and the forest in the years to come.