

USDA Forest Service Update

March 2014

Subject: Northern Spotted Owl



Issue: The Forest Service (FS) has been working across agency boundaries for two decades on recovery of the Northern Spotted Owl (NSO), a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. FS shares U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) concerns about the continued steady decline of NSO populations, which the revised final recovery plan states is due in part to historic habitat loss, current habitat loss and Barred Owl competition for NSO habitat and prey. We remain committed to improving ecosystem conditions for the NSO and other old growth-dependent species.

Key Points:

- The FWS released a revised final recovery plan for the NSO on June 30, 2011.
 - Implementation of the recovery plan will likely mean reductions in harvest volume from FS lands; however the impact is expected to be modest. The exact impact is difficult to estimate, since the amount of project volume affected is dependent upon Endangered Species Act (ESA), Section 7 consultation and future project locations.
 - In dry forest ecosystems, the Recovery Plan recognizes there may be short-term adverse effects to the NSO with long-term benefits. The Recovery Plan supports FS restoration activities in dry forest ecosystems.
- The Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for the Experimental Removal of Barred Owls to Benefit Threatened Northern Spotted Owls was signed by the FWS on September 10th 2013. Two experimental removal study areas are located on FS lands. The experimental removals of Barred Owls on FS lands is estimated to start sometime in 2015.
- FWS finalized critical habitat on December 4, 2012 using a range wide habitat model developed to assist with this process. Additional details about the model are included in Appendix C of the Recovery Plan. FWS worked with interested agencies on the development of the critical habitat.
- The FS is continuing to work with the FWS and other agencies on implementation of the Recovery Plan and Critical Habitat ESA, Section 7 consultation.

Background:

The NSO was listed as threatened in 1990 and critical habitat was later designated on approximately 6.88 million acres of federal lands. The Northwest Forest Plan was implemented in 1994, in part to protect and enhance conditions favorable to late successional and old growth-related species. Demographic studies indicate that NSO populations continue to decline (~3 percent annually). Although the specific reasons for the decline are uncertain, there is increasing evidence that Barred Owls appear to be competing with NSO for habitat and prey.

Contact:

Rob Harper, Director, Watershed, Fish, Wildlife, Air and Rare Plants, 202-205-1671.

Joseph Burns, Leader, Threatened, Endangered, & Sensitive Species Program 202-205-0919.