



American
Ornithologists'
Union

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SPOTTED OWL PLAN PROMPTS CALL FOR SCIENTIFIC EVALUATION

For Further Information Contact:

Ellen Paul, AOU, 301-986-8568
John Fitzgerald, SCB, 202-234-4133 x 107
Nate Spillman, SCB, 202-234-4133 x 100
Laura Bies, TWS, 301-897-9770

WASHINGTON D.C. — Calling for continued science-based protection for threatened northern spotted owls, several international scientific societies joined together today in asking the Department of the Interior (DOI) to reconsider its proposal for commercial timber harvesting in the Pacific Northwest.

In a letter to DOI Secretary Ken Salazar, the Society for Conservation Biology, The Wildlife Society, and the American Ornithologists' Union called for a full environmental impact statement (EIS) and peer-reviewed scientific assessment on the potential impacts of a DOI proposal that would allow substantial commercial timber harvesting in the critical habitat of threatened northern spotted owls in the Pacific Northwest. The societies are recommending that the EIS identify a range of experimental forestry techniques, appropriate scientific methodologies to assess those techniques, and a scientific process for evaluating impacts on northern spotted owls.



“I am disheartened that we are revisiting this hard-fought protection for northern spotted owls. The spotted owl continues to need protection,” Paul Beier, president of the Society for Conservation Biology, said. “Any activity that can have significant long-term consequences for the owl must be fully vetted by the peer review process. An environmental impact statement is the best vehicle for accomplishing this task,” he said.

Scientists note that critical habitat provides the ecological conditions that are essential for the survival and recovery of threatened and endangered species. Accordingly, the ESA requires all federal agencies, including the DOI, to avoid activities that will destroy or adversely modify critical habitat. While the designation of critical habitat does not eliminate the flexibility that the

DOI has with respect to managing northern spotted owl habitat, it does require the agency not to embark on a management scheme based on untested forestry management activities which could have significant, unforeseen, and long-term negative implications for the spotted owl.

“In 2011, Secretary Salazar was the first Secretary to approve a Scientific Integrity Policy, in part to re-establish the proper role of science in decision making regarding endangered species,” said Paul R. Krausman, President of The Wildlife Society. “While there may be legitimate disagreements regarding the best approach to recovering the northern spotted owl, peer review and a full environmental impact statement ensures that science will guide this work and keep mistakes to a minimum as we work toward the recovery of the owl,” he said.

There appears to be little scientific knowledge regarding the effects on the northern spotted owl of these proposed active forestry management techniques. Northern spotted owls primarily live in closed canopy, old-growth forests. The primary cause for their decline and subsequent protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) was due to unsustainable timber harvesting in the Pacific Northwest. While the DOI has asserted that these new active management activities will benefit the northern spotted owl over the long-term, scientists counter that this appears to be an untested and unverified management theory

According to John R. Faaborg, President of the American Ornithologists’ Union, “The USFWS has proved thoughtful in its approach to the barred owl question by planning carefully designed experiments to determine if the reduction of competition by this encroaching species will benefit the northern spotted owl. The AOU encourages the Service to take the same thoughtful approach to the issue of forest management and timber removal by approaching it first on an experimental basis.”

Read the [full letter](#) to DOI Secretary Ken Salazar.

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Background:

The northern spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis caurina*) was listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act in 1990 primarily as a result of the destruction of its old-growth forest habitat from a century of unsustainable, and poorly regulated, logging activities. In 1994, a multi-agency planning effort resulted in the establishment of the Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP), which coordinated management activities on over 24 million acres of federal land to protect the northern spotted owl and other endangered species in the Pacific Northwest. Under this plan, commercial timber harvests were permitted on approximately five million acres, and thinning and salvage activities were permitted in additional areas covered by the NWFP where such activities were in compliance with standards and guidelines designed to achieve conservation objectives set forth in the NWFP.