

Comments on Recovery Plan for the Northern Spotted Owl

Testimony of Dr. Jerry F. Franklin

At the Oversight Hearing of the Committee on Natural Resources on

“The Danger of Deception: Do Endangered Species Have a Chance”

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I am here today to provide testimony on development and revision of the Recovery Plan for the Northern Spotted Owl, which was released by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) on May 16, 2008. I am Professor of Ecosystem Analysis in the College of Forest Resources at the University of Washington. These comments reflect my own views and not those of any institution or organization with which I am associated.

Development of the recovery plan for the Northern Spotted Owl (*Strix caurina* var. *occidentalis*) (NSO) has a history that extends back nearly 20 years and which are interwoven with many other planning efforts, including the Interagency Scientific committee to Address the Conservation of the Northern Spotted Owl (Thomas *et al.* 1990), Scientific Committee on Late Successional Forest Ecosystems (1991), Forest Ecosystem Management Team (1993), and Northwest Forest Plan (1994), in which I have been personally involved. I was a member of the Sustainable Ecosystem Institute's (SEI) team that was commissioned by the USFWS to do a comprehensive 10-year science review of the owl. In 2007 the USFWS finally issued a Draft Recovery Plan, which received extensive public comment and scientific review, including by a scientific panel created by The Wildlife Society and in which I participated. Finally, earlier this year I participated in a science team commissioned by the USFWS and convened by SEI to advise the agency regarding responses to scientific criticisms raised of the draft plan in completing a final recovery plan.

The SEI Team was convened to assist the USFWS in assessing the merit of the numerous scientific criticisms that were made of the Draft Recovery Plan and in developing appropriate responses to these criticisms during revision of the draft plan. The report of this group, “*Scientific Review of the Draft Northern Spotted Owl Recovery Plan and Reviewer Comments*” is available at the Sustainable Ecosystems Institute website (<http://sei.org>). The team membership included several NSO specialists as well as scientific experts in fire ecology. SEI Team activities included two open meetings in which testimony was taken from numerous other scientific experts.

Major findings of the SEI review of the Draft Recovery Plan included: (1) Major threats remain the loss of suitable habitat to fire and timber harvest and Barred Owl competition; (2) Much geographic variability exists in the ecology of NSO, especially suitable habitat and prey use, and this needs to be reflected in a final recovery plan; (3) The Draft Recovery Plan underestimates the threat of habitat loss from fire and from harvest or salvage of large trees; (4) The Draft Recovery Plan is unclear about how much suitable habitat will be protected—and this must be clarified in a revised plan; (5) The relation of NSO to habitat

following wildfire in their home ranges is not clear—all fires do not result in habitat loss but intense stand-replacement fires are certainly not desirable circumstances for the owls; (6) Control of Barred Owls may be warranted but credible experimentation and other research needs to be done before a control program is designed and adopted; (7) Wildfire threats are seriously underplayed in the Draft Recovery Plan and are likely to increase with climate change; (8) ***The “. . . only viable conservation strategy [in the dry forests of the eastern Cascades] will be to actively managed fire-prone forests and landscapes to sustain Spotted Owl habitat. However, this needs to be closely monitored through an adaptive management process.”; and (9) “A simple reserve network is unsustainable in east-side fire-prone habitats. Conservation strategies, to be viable, must be designed and implemented at the landscape level.”*** The SEI team also concluded that dealing with wildfire threats to NSO habitat in the Klamath Province (Klamath-Siskiyou Mountains) is critical but could not reach a consensus on what strategies should be adopted, given the considerable ecological complexity of the region; hence, the team concluded that developing an active conservation strategy for NSO in that province is a high priority in the near future and that it should include a team of scientific and technical experts diverse in both expertise and institutional affiliation.

The SEI report on the Draft Recovery Plan emphasizes adaptive and collaborative approaches to approaching the several problem areas, including implementation of an Eastside Cascade management approach, development of a management approach for NSO in the Klamath Province, research and experimentation on Barred Owls; and, most important, general oversight on the implementation and effectiveness of a Final Recovery Plan. ***The history of the recovery planning effort and related federal activities, such as the Bureau of Land Management’s WOPR, makes clear that there is very little confidence in the ability of the federal agencies to objectively implement such programs without participation and oversight by scientific and technical personnel from outside the federal establishment. Models from other regional efforts, which involve independent standing committee’s of experts who are well educated and full engaged in regional conservation efforts, should be utilized in creating an oversight body for the final recovery plan.***

As is apparent from the preceding comments and the public record, ***the Draft Recovery Plan for the Northern Spotted Owl had significant scientific deficiencies.*** These included massive reductions in the acreage of critical habitat designated for the species, inappropriate extrapolation of scientific findings from the southwestern portions of the NSO range to its entire range, a failure to credibly address the threat of uncharacteristic wildfire in drier portions of the NSO range, and adoption of an aggressive program of Barred Owl removal without any scientific evidence as to whether it would be effective. All of the scientific reviews have been critical – intensely critical -- of many aspects of the Draft Recovery Plan and of its overall scientific credibility. ***In effect ,the Draft Recovery Plant failed all scientific tests.***

The final recovery plan for the NSO that was released last week represents a major improvement in scientific credibility over the draft recovery plan. The amount of critical habitat, identified as Managed Owl Conservation Areas (MOCAs) has been modestly increased, although it still falls well short of designating all suitable NSO habitat on federal lands. A credible strategy is provided for addressing risks of NSO habitat loss to uncharacteristic stand replacement wildfires has been incorporated into the plan (I will elaborate more on this later in my testimony). There is a plan for comprehensive scientific study

and experimentation on the relationships between the barred and spotted owl prior to any extensive barred owl removal program.

USFWS is to be applauded for these significant improvements in the scientific content of the final Northern Spotted Owl Recovery Plan. ***However, it is important that Congress recognize that these improvements are largely a consequence of the oversight provided by extensive public involvement, including comprehensive and independent scientific review during the development of the recovery plan.***

It is important to continue this kind of public oversight and broad scientific participation during the implementation of the plan. Specifically, the plan calls for the development of several inter-organizational working groups, including a group that will oversee implementation of the plan and subgroups that will deal with the research programs on Barred Owls, development of a strategy for the Klamath Province, and implementation of the eastside landscape management approach. The USFWS apparently intends to only populate these working groups with employees of federal agencies; if this is correct, it is a serious mistake. ***Oversight and planning activities of these types should draw their participants from diverse organizations and stakeholder groups; they should not be limited to participants from federal agencies.*** Beyond broadened participation in these processes, independent third-party assessments are going to be critical in assuring the viability and credibility of adaptive management processes.

My personal perspectives on two specific aspects of the Final Recovery Plan follow:

Conservation Areas. The 133 owl conservation areas identified in the plan are not adequate. These are based on an old reserve design that was developed by the Interagency Scientific Committee to Address the Conservation of the Northern Spotted Owl (the “Thomas Committee”) in 1989-1990. This system of reserves (referred to as Habitat Conservation Areas or HCAs at that time) was designed to provide adequate habitat for NSOs but distributed so as to minimize impacts on timber harvest programs. I see no scientific reason why the USFWS would have based their approach on this old strategy. The Northwest Forest Plan provided for a much more extensive system of Late Successional Reserves (LSRs), a system of reserves superior to the HCAs in both the amount and quality of owl habitat that was conserved. Given the critical status of the NSO it seems appropriate to me to provide both the larger amount and better quality of habitat found in the LSRs in preference to the system of MOCAs adapted from the earlier HCA strategy. An explanation of why LSRs were not used as the identified and mapped conservation area system is not provided in the Final Recovery Plan. ***The USFWS should use the NW Forest Plan’s system of Late Successional Reserves as the core of the NSO conservation area strategy and supplement it as necessary with additional designated conservation areas. Given the declining status of NSO populations, these additions to the LSRs might well include all mature and old-growth forest outside of the LSRs on moist forest sites.***

Eastside Dry Forest Strategy. Better explanation or elaboration of the highly meritorious eastern Cascade Range dry forest strategy is appropriate in both press releases and in the main body of the plan, although a fuller presentation is available in an appendix. The press release describes the strategy as “. .

. one of shifting spotted owl habitat patches in an entire landscape . . .”; the emphasis should not be on the transient or shifting nature of the patches since ***the real intent is actually to decrease the risk that the denser forest patches of NSO nesting, roosting, and foraging habitat will burn*** and, conversely, increase the probability that the designated patches will persist. Further, at various places the plan describes the treatments of the forests within which these patches are embedded as “thinning”; in fact, the silvicultural treatments are much more than simply thinning but, rather, restoration treatments that include prescribed fire and efforts to conserve and restore mature and old tree populations. USFWS should emphasize these landscape-level treatments as silvicultural treatments to restore more historic or characteristic (and, certainly, more sustainable) conditions and that the patches of NSO habitat will not be subject to significant mechanical thinning but, rather, retained intact and for as far into the future as possible.

This approach of providing for sustainable owl habitat in the context of a larger, more holistic effort to restore the dry forest landscapes, stands, and old tree populations on the eastern slope of the Cascades is important. Optimizing the output of any single resource inevitably results in adverse affects on other elements of the ecosystem, whether organisms, processes or disturbance regimes. The proposed approach in the dry eastside Cascade forest holds the potential to benefit the full array of resources.

Which leads me to my concluding comment on the NSO recovery planning process: ***I conclude my comments with a plea for holistic integrated approaches to resolution of natural resource management issues, including those related to endangered species.*** Historically there is a pattern of sequential episodes of planning and management of natural resources that essentially focus on a primary resource value. The dominant focus was wood production for many decades, shifted to conservation of biological diversity (as exemplified by Northern Spotted Owls), and, most recently to fuel treatments related to wildfire. It is inevitable that when we adopt a dominant focus on any single resource that there are significant negative impacts on other important resource values; ***it seems to be one of those great absolutes that this inevitably happens when you optimize for one specific resource outcome.*** Focusing primarily on timber production is a great example for we learned incontrovertibly that devoting a landscape primarily to maximizing wood production will result in negative impacts to many other important resource values, regardless of efforts at mitigation. ***Natural processes rarely produce forests and landscapes that “optimize” for specific organisms or processes, including disturbances; that is simply not the pattern by which they evolved. I believe that we need to stop lurching from one singular emphasis to another and begin to develop management regimes that truly integrate a variety of objectives (including timber production, provision of NSO habitat, and greater sustainability in the face elevated disturbance regimes). These approaches must be: Based on fundamental scientific knowledge about forest ecosystems and landscapes, including their integrated terrestrial and aquatic components; Holistic in their perspective and integrative in practice; and Actively engage stakeholders in both design and implementation, incorporate adaptive approaches, and provide for credible public oversight of agency performance.***