

Testimony of the Honorable Paul Pearce, Commissioner, Skamania County, WA
on behalf of the National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition

Before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands of the
House Natural Resource Committee

Field hearing on

Failed Federal Forest Policies: Endangering Jobs, Forests and Species

Good morning Chairman Hastings and Congresswoman Herrera Beutler. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you as National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition Vice President, NACo's Public Lands Steering Committee Vice Chair, and most importantly as the Chair of the Skamania County Board of Commissioners, a county 90% impacted by Federal Land management.

Since the listing of the Northern Spotted Owl we have witnessed the wholesale destruction of an industry and economy. From 1970 to 1990 Gifford Pinchot Forest alone produced on averaged 350 million board feet of timber yearly. The forests mortality rate is 218 million board feet and the growth rate is 1.1 billion board feet. Harvest even at that level barely surpassed the mortality rate.

Beginning in 1992 with Critical Habitat, followed by the 1994 Northwest Forest Plan we saw the continued loss of timber jobs and infrastructure at an incredible rate. In 1990 there were 1200 jobs on the Gifford Pinchot Forest, 350 of them were forest service employees. There were four full time mills operating in my county alone.

Today there are few timber jobs and only one full time mill. And they truck logs in, mostly from non-federal lands. You'll hear the same stories from Counties containing National Forests from the Canadian border to mid California.

Congress passed Owl Guarantee payments for those counties and schools hit with the loss of their entire economy so as to allow agencies to get their act together resuming some level of sustainable harvest. This did not happen and SRS/County Payments was passed from 2000 through this last payment in 2012. These payments kept the county Governments and the Schools operating but also turned us into the largest employers.

Our general fund budget for 2012 was cut from 14.5 million to 10 million. We face another 4 million cut in 2013. Like most public land counties we only have a small sliver of land available for property tax. Our school districts are facing a similar fate. Enrollment has dropped by 28% over 20 years. We average 60 percent free and reduced lunch, a key indicator of poverty. Our unemployment rate is still near 12% with an underemployment rate much higher.

Three counties in Oregon face insolvency. These statistics are true for the highly public land dependant counties in all three states and across the country.

So as the Service now suggests doubling Critical Habitat from 6 million to 14 million acres in Washington, Oregon and California the counties have simply had enough. Especially when the Services indicates that the greatest peril to the Spotted Owl is from the Barred Owl.

Skamania County in Washington, Douglas County in Oregon and Siskiyou County in California are the leads for their sister counties. We have requested a 90 day extension of the public comment deadline. We have had no official reply to as yet.

The Service tells us they will not have their economic or environmental reports done until late May which leaves barely 30 days to reply. We are informed that their economic impact report will begin on the day this new Critical Habitat is final and will not look at historic impacts.

Members of the Service unofficially complain that an extension is impossible because they are under a court ordered deadline of November 15th. This is a gross misstatement of fact

I quote from the federal register at page 1408:

“On October 12, 2010, the Court remanded the 2008 critical habitat designation ... and adopted the *Service's* proposed schedule to issue a new proposed revised critical habitat rule for public comment by November 15, 2011, and a final rule by November 15, 2012....”

The Service created the schedule then missed the deadline for public comment by seven months. They can certainly move the other deadlines by 90 days.

The Counties have no faith in the economic study and have commissioned our own. In the 1992 Final Plan at page 1815 the Service makes a number of estimates as to the impacts of the listing and critical habitat for the Northern Spotted Owl. They estimate that *only* 27,000 jobs would be lost stating that this was only 3% of timber related jobs *nationwide*; as if the owl were listed nationwide. We know that Oregon alone lost in excess of 40,000. They further estimate the impact to the federal treasury at 50 million dollars per year. We know based on actual payments prior to the listing that this number is closer to 700 million dollars per year.

Also the three counties I mentioned above have this morning filed for Cooperating Agency status on the final plan on behalf of all affected counties.

This Critical Habitat makes the provisions of Chairman Hastings' "Federal Forests County Revenue, Schools, and Jobs Act of 2012" House Bill 4109 impossible to implement across the landscape of these Owl impacted Forests.

Timber harvest by the Forest Service and BLM is abysmal. Department of Natural Resources in Washington State manages the counties timber lands. DNR has a Habitat Conservation Plan including the Spotted Owl. DNR manages 2.2 million acres. The Forest Service 9.3 million. From 2008 through 2010 DNR *sustainably* harvested 1.8 billion board feet of timber. The Forest

Service harvested 387 million board feet. DNR ... at 23% of the acreage ... harvested 465% of the volume as compared to the forest service.

Finally as I speak to public lands impacted County Commissioners I find that no matter their political persuasion; for the most part they have the same message. No more wilderness, wilderness like, roadless, roadless like, natural preserves or other set asides, of these public lands until we have settled the active management, and significant economic questions before us.