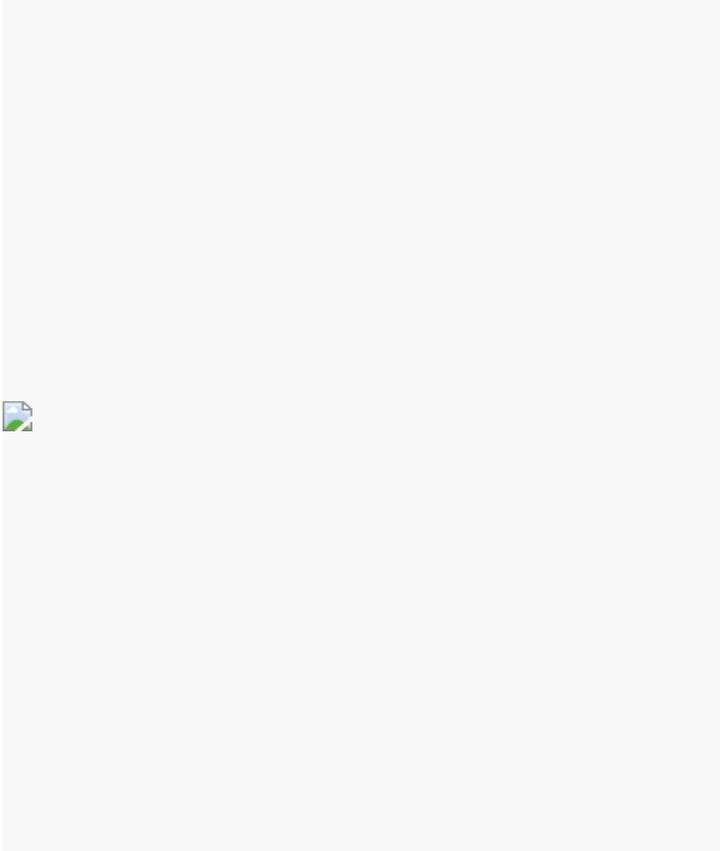


## Changes in plan to protect owl raise concerns about NW forests

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1 of 5 | The northern spotted owl remains under threat.

**A proposed new plan released Thursday to protect northern spotted owls includes changes urged by high-level officials in the Bush administration...**

By [Warren Cornwall](#)

A proposed new plan released Thursday to protect northern spotted owls includes changes urged by high-level officials in the Bush administration, leading environmentalists to charge that the administration is again threatening Northwest old-growth forests.

“We kind of expected that there would be some pressure to water down the recovery plan and to reduce the level of protection for the owl and for the old-growth forest,” said Tim Cullinan, a National Audubon Society biologist who was part of the so-called “recovery team” that put together the proposal.

“But I think we were taken by surprise at the sheer audacity with which the administration tried to interfere in this plan.”

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials confirmed the proposed plan was changed after the administration officials reviewed it. But the service defended the resulting proposal Thursday, saying it offers more flexibility while still protecting the owl.

“At no time did any of them, at least to me, tell me they wanted anything less protective or less valuable to the owl,” said David Wesley, deputy regional director of the Fish and Wildlife Service. “They were just asking, ‘Aren’t there other creative ways to do this?’ “

Timber-industry representatives also said the plan supported greater flexibility and added that science on the owls has changed. Nowadays the biggest problem facing the spotted owl is not logging, they said, but an aggressive, invasive bird called the barred owl.

The new proposals call for hundreds of barred owls to be shot as an experiment to determine the effect on spotted-owl populations.

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### **Northern spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis caurina*)**

A medium-size, dark-brown owl with white spots on its head and breast and brown eyes. Males and females appear similar, but females are somewhat larger.

**Range:** Southwestern British Columbia, Western Washington and Oregon, and northwestern California.

**Life cycle:** Reaches sexual maturity after two years; monogamous mating. Adult females lay an average of two eggs per clutch. Mostly nocturnal. Preys on northern flying squirrels, wood rats, voles, mice, rabbits and other birds.

**Status:** Listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. State-listed as endangered in Washington and threatened in California and Oregon.

*Source: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*

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### **Environmental battle**

This is but the latest in a long history of controversy surrounding the reclusive but emblematic owl with a penchant for nesting in old-growth forests. The spotted owl, protected under the Endangered Species Act, was at the center of fights over logging in the 1980s and early '90s.

That led to the 1994 Northwest Forest Plan, a deal brokered by the Clinton administration putting large amounts of the Northwest's remaining federal old-growth forest off-limits to most logging. In all, it covered 24.5 million acres of federal land from the Canadian border to Northern California.

Thursday, after years of legal wrangling, the Fish and Wildlife Service issued its draft proposal for public comment.

It offers two scenarios to guide recovery of the owls over the next 30 years, at an estimated cost of \$198 million. Only one option will be picked.

The recovery team — made up of environmentalists, timber-industry representatives and state and federal officials — initially sent only one recommendation to the administration for review at the end of last September.

That proposal mostly mimicked the Northwest Forest Plan already in effect by delineating important owl habitat in Washington, Oregon and Northern California for protection from activities like clear-cut logging.

But the administration officials, including Agriculture Undersecretary Mark Rey, who is a former timber lobbyist, and Lynn Scarlett, the Interior Department's deputy secretary, sent the plan back to the recovery team.

According to Wesley, the administration group asked for a new, more flexible way to recover the owls that didn't rely on strategies of the past.

In response, the second option was added. It would let locally based federal land-use managers decide which parts of federal forests get protected, though it would set guidelines meant to ensure that enough owl habitat is still set aside.

Ren Lohofener, director of the Forest Service's Pacific Region, said the strategy would enable officials to adapt to changes to the forest from such influences as fires, windstorms and insect infestations.

"We really need a recovery plan that is dynamic, that can change," he said.

But Dominick DellaSala, of the National Center for Conservation Science and Policy, who served on the team drafting the plan, says the second option could cut total Northwest Forest Plan acreage recommended for owl-habitat protection by more than 800,000 acres, based on a simulation the recovery team conducted in February.

Lohofener said the second option could result in protection for more forest or less forest, depending on how agencies decide what land to set aside.

**New science stirs debate**

Meanwhile, timber-industry representatives said the environmentalists are backing a plan based on outdated science. Now the birds are thought to rely on a mix of habitat, not just old growth, say timber officials. And the emerging threats of massive wildfires and aggressive barred owls are more urgent than habitat loss.

“The issue is, do you think you could do a better job of drawing lines — to get more habitat — with 14 years of new information,” said Ed Murphy, of Sierra Pacific Industries, who was part of the recovery team.

The timber industry has long complained about the Clinton forest plan, saying the federal government has never made good on assurances that timber companies would still get a billion board feet of lumber from federal Northwest forests every year.

### **Barred owl poses threat**

The new spotted-owl proposal did find agreement on one common enemy — the barred owl. The larger, more aggressive bird originally from the Northeast has been taking over spotted-owl nests and chasing away the rarer birds.

The new proposal calls barred owls — not clear-cutting — the biggest threat facing spotted owls. To beat back the barred owls, the plan calls for shooting them in 18 experimental areas. Up to 576 barred owls could be killed.

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