

**OPEN LETTER FROM 229 SCIENTISTS IN SUPPORT OF  
THE NORTHWEST FOREST PLAN AS A GLOBAL AND REGIONAL MODEL  
FOR CONSERVATION AND ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT**

**June 14, 2012**

As scientists with backgrounds in natural resource management and ecology, we wish to express our full support for the Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP), a global model in ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation<sup>1</sup>. The protective provisions of the late-successional reserve (LSR) network and the Aquatic Conservation Strategy (ACS) are fundamental to the plan's objectives and recent science confirms that these designations along with other elements of the NWFP are at least as vital today as they were when originally conceived by the plan's architects<sup>2</sup>. We are writing at this time, because we are concerned that the first forest-plan revision in the Pacific Northwest calls for dismantling key conservation biology principles of the NWFP by eliminating the LSR network and weakening the ACS.

The proposed draft revised forest plan for the Okanogan-Wenatchee forest, located on the east slopes of the Cascade Range in Washington, proposes changing the LSR designation to "Restoration Areas" within which vague active management practices will take place and moving away from the more protective standards and guidelines of the ACS. The Forest Service cites climate-related predictions that call for a doubling or tripling of fire by century's end in the Washington Cascades, and the agency claims that this, along with elevated insect and disease risks, is justification for eliminating reserve categories and weakening the ACS. However, even if such disturbances were to increase as a result of climate change, this is not cause for drastic measures that eliminate the region's underlying conservation strategy, particularly given the NWFP is a robust conservation strategy that allows for restorative actions in its current land-use configurations.

Under the NWFP, ~30% (7.4 million acres) of federal lands in the Pacific Northwest that were traditionally managed for timber production were designated as LSRs to provide habitat for hundreds of wildlife species associated with older forests that have been greatly depleted by logging across the landscape. These reserves are not inviolate and allow for some forms of logging – thinning in young forests to accelerate late-successional development and fuel reduction for fire concerns – provided they comply with the plan's standards and guidelines. The ACS, through its various components, including establishing Riparian Reserves and identification and protection of Key Watersheds, also was designed to restore and maintain

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<sup>1</sup>DellaSala, D. A., & J. Williams. 2006. Northwest Plan Ten Years Later – how far have we come and where are we going. *Conservation Biology* 20:274-276.

<sup>2</sup>See special feature in *Conservation Biology* 2006. Volume 20. Reeves, G. et al. 2004. The aquatic conservation strategy of the Northwest Forest Plan. *Conservation Biology* 20:319-329. Courtney, S.P et al. 2004. Scientific evaluation of the status of the northern spotted owl. Sustainable Ecosystems Institute, Portland, Oregon.

ecological processes for aquatic and riparian areas. These areas have shown measurable improvements in watershed conditions since the plan's inception<sup>3</sup>.

The architects of the NWFP envisioned the LSR network as a regional and robust conservation strategy of sufficient redundancy in late-successional forest types, so that disturbance-related reductions in any given type would not affect the overall conservation strategy for that type. The reserves also were designed to be an interconnected ecosystem to accommodate wildlife shifts from recently disturbed to undisturbed areas. Protected reserves like those in the NWFP remain the cornerstone of scientifically sound conservation strategies globally, especially as threats to fundamental ecosystem services accelerate from climate change and land-use stressors. However, in the Pacific Northwest there have been attempts by federal agencies at weakening reserve protections or eliminating them entirely in favor of untested non-reserve, active management approaches as reflected by elements of earlier (2006, 2008) drafts of the northern spotted owl recovery plan. The Wildlife Society, Society for Conservation Biology, and American Ornithologists Union summarily rejected these approaches in peer review as being scientifically incredulous<sup>4</sup>.

The conservation foundation of the NWFP, which is rooted in fixed reserves, has been broadly supported in the scientific literature<sup>5</sup>. This is largely because the reserve network is the backbone to a regional conservation strategy for hundreds of species that depend on older forests that are relatively rare on surrounding nonfederal lands. The older forests and intact watersheds that these reserves protect, or seek to restore, also provide a myriad of related ecosystem benefits, including storing vast quantities of atmospheric carbon in live and dead trees and soils important in climate regulation, refugia and a relatively connected landscape for climate-forced migrations of wildlife in search of cool, moist conditions, and high quality water for aquatic organisms and people. Notably, in a five-year status review of the northern spotted owl, scientists<sup>6</sup> concluded that there was no reason to depart from the NWFP and that the situation for the owl would be bleaker today if not for the NWFP<sup>7</sup>. In addition, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in its 2011 revised critical habitat proposal for the owl stated that “results from the first decade of monitoring do not provide any reason to depart from the objective of habitat maintenance and restoration as described in the Northwest Forest Plan.” Recent science on

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<sup>3</sup>Reeves, G. Ibid.

<sup>4</sup><http://www.fws.gov/oregonfwo/Species/Data/NorthernSpottedOwl/Recovery/Plan/>

<sup>5</sup>Courtney, S.P. et al. 2004. Ibid. Lint, J. 2005. Population status and trends. Pages 7–19 in J. Lint, technical coordinator. Northwest Forest Plan—the first 10 years (1994–2003): status and trends of northern spotted owl populations and habitat. U.S. Forest Service General Technical Report PNW-GTR-648, Pacific Northwest Research Station, Portland, Oregon. DellaSala, D. A., & J. Williams. Ibid

<sup>6</sup>Courtney et al 2004. Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Anthony, R.G. et al. 2006. Status and trends in demography of northern spotted owls, 1985–2003. Wildlife Monograph No. 163.

climate change refugia also documents the importance of protecting old forests in reserves as climatic refugia.<sup>8</sup>

The Okanagan dry forest ecoregion was identified by the World Wildlife Fund as nationally significant but critically endangered due to extensive logging, grazing, mining, road building, fire suppression and other land-use disturbances<sup>9</sup>. Over half of the region's old forests have been logged and few intact areas remain.<sup>10</sup> The onset of climate change combined with ongoing land-use stressors pose unprecedented threats to key ecosystem services such as high quality water, carbon stored in old-forest ecosystems and wetlands, and fish and wildlife habitat. The continuation of the reserve network that includes both the LSRs and ACS among other land designations is even more fundamental today precisely because of climate change -- reducing these protections is neither consistent with conservation nor science-based climate adaptation or mitigation strategies.

Sincerely,

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<sup>8</sup>Olson, D.M., et al. 2012. Climate change refugia for biodiversity in the Klamath-Siskiyou ecoregion. *Natural Areas Journal* 32:65-74.

<sup>9</sup>Ricketts et al. 1999. Terrestrial ecoregions of North America: a conservation assessment. Island Press, Washington, D.C.

<sup>10</sup>Strittholt et al. 2006. Status of mature and old-growth forests in the Pacific Northwest, *Conservation Biology* 20:363-374.

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