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Bush seeks to shrink owl land

Logging - A plan would drop safeguards on 1.6 million acres considered critical spotted owl habitat

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The Bush administration Tuesday moved to drop safeguards from 1.6 million acres of public forest seen as critical habitat for the northern spotted owl, making it easier for federal agencies to proceed with logging there.

The spotted owl in the 1980s became a poster child for protection of the old-growth habitat where it lives and was protected as a threatened species in 1990 after much of that forest was logged.

Its protection nearly halted logging, sending the region -- especially rural timber communities -- into wrenching change.

Even as forests recover, the spotted owl faces a new threat from a winged competitor: the tougher and more aggressive barred owl.

Federal wildlife officials portrayed their reduction of habitat for the owl as a refinement of earlier numbers based on new mapping technology and better knowledge of the species. But the move was mandated by a legal settlement between the administration and the timber industry, which contends that designating too much habitat for spotted owls binds the hands of agencies. Logging is allowed in owl habitat, but agencies must clear extra hurdles to make sure it doesn't jeopardize the species.

Forest activists also use habitat designation as leverage to slow or stop federal timber sales. That has interfered with a Bush administration push to boost logging in the Northwest to meet the goals of the Clinton-era Northwest Forest Plan

Wildfires, meanwhile, have burned some owl habitat, and timber leaders said thinning forests through logging could slow the pace of blazes.

"There needs to be flexibility to do whatever is needed to recover the owl, and it may include management," said Chris West of the American Forest Resource Council, a Portland-based timber group.

The reduction in owl habitat acreage is also closely aligned with a new owl recovery plan that some critics -- including some who worked on it -- say was politically manipulated from Washington, D.C.

"It just makes no sense to me at a time when the decline of the owl is accelerating," said Dominick DellaSala, a forest ecologist who served on the team that wrote the plan but disagrees with the result. "The size of the blocks is getting smaller, and they're dropping more acreage."

The recovery plan also proposes experimental shooting of barred owls to see if it helps spotted owls.

The habitat move proposed Tuesday -- now open to public comment -- cuts nearly 25 percent of the Northwest acreage designated as critical habitat for the owl, from 6.9 million to 5.3 million acres. The largest reduction is in Oregon, where about 1.1 million acres -- about the size of the Mount Hood National Forest -- would be dropped.

Much of that land lies on the west slope of the Cascades and the Coast Range, where the U.S. Bureau of Land Management is rewriting its logging plans and may do away with older forest reserves intended for owls and other wildlife.

In many cases the Bush administration has reduced the amount of critical habitat designated for species by earlier administrations.

Joan Jewett, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said the change in acreage for the owl is not to accommodate logging but to reflect the latest available science on spotted owls and their habitat needs. Wilderness areas and national parks were also dropped as designated owl habitat because they are already protected.

"It's important not to look at it as taking away but building a new conservation approach from the ground up," she said.

The timber industry complained that the habitat designation still includes more acreage than necessary for the owl and that the separate recovery plan will spell out the real road to survival.

"There's a lot of acres included in this proposal that is not owl habitat and the owls don't use it," West said. He said activists want more owl habitat so they can use it as a surrogate to block forest management through logging or thinning.

The Fish and Wildlife Service will examine the economic impacts of the proposal in an analysis within the next six months.

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