



# United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE  
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Portland, Oregon 97232-4181



In Reply Refer to:  
FWS/R1/AES/88 FR 87393

Jacqueline Buchanan  
U.S. Forest Service  
1220 SW 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue  
Portland, Oregon 97204

Dear Ms. Buchanan:

The Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) appreciates this opportunity to provide input on the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) Pacific Northwest and Pacific Southwest Region's proposal to amend the 1994 Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP). While the Service does not directly manage large forest ecosystems, we influence how these forest lands are managed through our various authorities, programs, and partnerships with forest land managers such as the USFS, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), National Park Service, State agencies, and private landowners. Under the NWFP, the USFS and the Service have worked collaboratively for over three decades to conserve Pacific Northwest forests and their species.

The Service appreciates the opportunities to date to engage in discussions with the USFS about the amendment process, and the opportunity to present to the Federal Advisory Committee (FAC) on November 14, 2023. We are also encouraged that the consultation agreement between USFS, National Marine Fisheries Service, and the Service is moving toward being signed and adopted by our respective agencies. We believe the consultation agreement establishes a cooperative process for conducting Endangered Species Act (ESA) section 7 consultation for the NWFP amendment process, and clarifies roles, responsibilities, and authorities.

As the amendment process moves forward, we would like to reiterate the Service's key messages that were presented at the November FAC meeting for consideration by USFS:

- The Service supports active management of altered forest habitat to improve climate change resilience and reduce the risk of severe wildfire. Active management needs to be strategically sited and evaluated at the stand and landscape level with specific actions contributing to the maintenance and restoration of ecological processes. This is particularly evident in dry forest ecosystems. Please reference the enclosed Northern Spotted Owl (NSO) Revised Recovery Plan regarding concepts and principles for actively managing dry forests for ecological processes.

## PACIFIC REGION 1

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IDAHO, OREGON\*, WASHINGTON,  
AMERICAN SAMOA, GUAM, HAWAII, NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS

\*PARTIAL

- The Service supports conservation of all older forests, even outside of mapped reserves, and believes that commercial harvest should be precluded in old forest stands unless consistent with climate, conservation, and species recovery goals. High severity wildfire risk management, done strategically, is a component of conservation. Any consideration of changes to reserved Late Successional-Old Growth habitat should be informed by the latest modeling tools available with a goal of creating long-term resiliency of forest habitat and a conservation network that will support NSO recovery along with other old growth species. This is consistent with the NSO Recovery Plan (enclosed) regarding the conservation of structurally complex forest habitat (Recovery Action 32). The Service is also encouraged by the USFS's December 20, 2023, Notice of Intent (NOI) in the Federal Register to initiate a national process for mapping and protecting mature and old growth forest (MOG).
- Management of invasive barred owl populations is necessary across the range of NSO and California spotted owls for the conservation of the species (along with active forest management to improve stand and landscape resiliency and protection of older forest). Over the last two years, the Service and other cooperating agencies and partners, including USFS, have been developing the Barred Owl Management Strategy and associated draft Environmental Impact Statement. These documents published in the Federal Register on November 17, 2023. Realistic and effective barred owl management must be part of any meaningful discussion of NSO recovery and should be analyzed for and incorporated into the NWFP amendment process. This includes modeling response of spotted owl populations to barred owl management and evaluating and incorporating the resulting implications into the Plan amendment. Currently occupied NSO sites are increasingly important for the recovery of the species. The Service continues to recommend conservation of spotted owls based on the principles of Recovery Action 10 in the NSO Recovery Plan.
- The Service supports the USFS continued focus on aquatic conservation through riparian management. Riparian buffers provide important habitat for aquatic species and habitat connectivity for terrestrial species. Development and implementation of riparian buffer management should be based on best available science and provide for demonstrated connectivity for wide ranging terrestrial species.
- Marbled murrelet populations continue to decline in some areas within the NWFP planning area. For this reason, the Service recommends protective measures for occupied murrelet stands consistent with the Marbled Murrelet Recovery Plan.
- The Service looks forward to working with the USFS on the development of conservation measures consistent with the USFS's authorities and obligations under Section 7(a)(1) of the ESA. We believe the aforementioned items of old forest conservation, barred owl management and occupied spotted owl site protection provide outstanding opportunities for Pacific Northwest forest ecosystem conservation. We stand ready to work with the USFS in incorporating these principles into the Plan amendment.
- We remain concerned that the current timeline for completion of a Record of Decision – by December 2024 – including completion of a biological opinion by the Service, is not

feasible. Ongoing workload associated with Wildfire Crisis Strategy implementation, along with the December 2023 NOI regarding mapping and protecting MOG forests and the potential for concurrent and overlapping workload related to these processes adds to our concerns. We acknowledge the very real sense of urgency to address the impacts of climate change, particularly reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire and we are committed to working collaboratively with the USFS, but the Service cannot guarantee a biological opinion on the timeline as presented. In the interest of collaboration and durability and defensibility of the Service biological opinion on the amendment, the Service requests flexibility in the proposed consultation schedule.

The Service appreciates the opportunity to provide scoping comments on the NWFP amendment process and looks forward to continuing to coordinate throughout the consultation process. If you have any questions about the scoping comments, please contact Kessina Lee, Oregon State Supervisor, at [kessina\\_lee@fws.gov](mailto:kessina_lee@fws.gov).

Sincerely,

Hugh Morrison  
Regional Director

#### Attachments

Northern Spotted Owl Revised Recovery Plan (2011)  
USFWS Vision and Goals for PNW Forest Management to Address Climate Change (2021)  
Draft Barred Owl Management Strategy (2023)