



# Oregon

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U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Chief Randy Moore Director (630)  
U.S. Forest Service  
1400 Independence Ave. SW  
Washington, D.C. 20250-0003

*Submitted electronically through the Federal eRulemaking Portal:*

**RE: Region 5 and Region 6; California, Oregon, and Washington; Forest Plan Amendment for Planning and Management of Northwest Forests Within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl**

Dear Chief Moore,

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) appreciates the opportunity to provide comment on the Region 5 and Region 6; California, Oregon, and Washington; Forest Plan Amendment for Planning and Management of Northwest Forests Within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl (NWFP Amendment) (88 FR 87393, pages 87393-87398).

It is the policy of the State of Oregon (Oregon Revised Statute [ORS] 496.012) that wildlife shall be managed to prevent serious depletion of any indigenous species and to provide the optimum recreational and aesthetic benefits for present and future generations of the citizens of this state. In furtherance of the state of Oregon's wildlife policy, ODFW's [Fish and Wildlife Habitat Mitigation Policy](#) (Oregon Administrative Rule 635 Division 415) sets guidelines to avoid, minimize or mitigate the impact from a development action on fish and wildlife habitat and establishes mitigation goals dependent on the habitat functions and values. ODFW's Habitat Division leads proactive, focused, and consistent efforts to protect, restore, and enhance habitat for Oregon's fish and wildlife.

The Notice of Intent (NOI) identifies a preliminary need to amend the Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP) in five interrelated topic areas:

1. Improving fire resistance and resilience across the NWFP planning area;
2. Strengthening the capacity of NWFP ecosystems to adapt to the ongoing effects of climate change;
3. Improving conservation and recruitment of mature and old-growth forest conditions, ensuring adequate habitat for species dependent upon mature and old growth ecosystems and supporting regional biodiversity;

4. Incorporating Indigenous Knowledge into planning, project design, and implementation to achieve forest management goals and meet the agency's general trust responsibilities;
5. Providing a predictable supply of timber and non-timber products, and other economic opportunities to support the long-term sustainability of communities located proximate to National Forest System lands and economically connected to forest resources.

ODFW concurs that changed ecological and social conditions and substantial new information supports the need for an amendment to the Northwest Forest Plan. In general, ODFW supports amending the NWFP in the five areas referenced in the NOI. In addition, undertaking an amendment to the plan is a critical time to also consider modernization of the NWFP *Aquatic Conservation Strategy* and management of riparian areas on the National Forest lands in the plan area. ODFW encourages the Forest Service to add improving riparian management to the list of topics to be covered in the amendment.

## **Recommendations**

### *1. Fire resilience*

Restoring historic fire regimes - ODFW supports the restoration of ecological function and resilience to forests that have been negatively affected by decades of fire suppression and certain timber management practices. The standard methods that promote fire resiliency (prescribed burns, thinning) are also likely to reduce homogeneity on the landscape and promote understory growth and forage for a variety of wildlife species. ODFW supports forest management practices to reduce fuel loads in old growth forests, only if those treatments avoid and minimize short and long-term impacts to sensitive and special status wildlife species. ODFW recommends focusing on returning forests and fire regimes to their historic range of variation for ecological reasons beyond simply reducing the risk of wildfire. Using Tribal Traditional Knowledge for prescribed fire plans and conservative “let burn” policies when they can be applied safely have the potential for significant ecological benefits will move National Forest lands towards historic fire resilient conditions.

Protecting water temperatures - Vegetation thinning is an often used fire risk reduction strategy, but thinning in riparian areas at a landscape scale may do more damage to riparian function and water quality than catastrophic fire. Removal of appropriately stocked canopy from riparian habitats with the intent to minimize fire impacts will allow for greater penetration of sunlight to streams with strong negative effects to cold water species (salmonids, Pacific giant salamanders, other amphibians) when considered with expected temperature increases this century. ODFW recommends that Riparian Reserves be managed at historical stand densities at the localized scale to maintain adequate canopy shading and understory of native shrubs despite the fire risk.

### *2. Climate change*

ODFW supports the proposal to address the threats from climate change by promoting climate adapted species assemblages in areas of changing climatic conditions, and with proactive stewardship, including the retention, recruitment, natural succession, and connectivity of old-growth forest conditions such that future conditions are resilient and adaptable to stressors and likely future environments.

In 2020, ODFW adopted its [Climate and Ocean Policy](#) to provide guidance to the agency on addressing the effects of climate change to fish and wildlife in Oregon. One of the goals of

the policy is to provide leadership toward a coordinated statewide and regional response that minimizes the impacts of changing climate and ocean conditions on Oregon's natural resources and the communities, culture, and economies reliant on them, and allows for sustainable use of natural resources in the future. ODFW has been at the forefront of research, monitoring, and management policies related to understanding and addressing the effects of climate change on Oregon's native biota. It is critical the NWFP Amendment addresses the impacts of climate change on forest ecosystems in the northwest. Given the agency's wealth of knowledge and experience, ODFW recommends the Forest Service consult with the agency in development of management actions that address the effects of climate change on National Forests in Oregon.

Connectivity - ODFW appreciates that the NWFP Amendment recognizes the importance of connectivity to provide fish and wildlife climate and fire refugia. In order to meet the objective of providing climate and fire refugia to prepare for the impacts of climate change, ODFW recommends that the Forest Service prioritize the identification and mapping of refugia and connectivity areas on national forest and adjacent lands, prioritize refugia in dry forests for restoration treatment especially in riparian area, and use adaptive management to respond to climate threats in real time to provide connected refugia and migration corridors as conditions change.

ODFW has mapped [Priority Wildlife Connectivity Areas \(PWCAs\)](#) to provide information on places across the landscape with the highest overall value for facilitating wildlife movement. The network of PWCAs serves as a science-based, informational tool to support planning for and implementation of habitat enhancement, restoration, conservation, transportation mitigation, land-use, and development efforts. Combined with a comprehensive fish passage database, ODFW has a thorough accounting of high use movement corridors for fish and wildlife that can inform the NWFP Amendment.

Like ODFW, many states and Tribes recognize the value of connectivity and refugia areas and are engaged in efforts to identify and map critical movement corridors. Given this local knowledge of fish and wildlife ecology, ODFW recommends that the Forest Service consult with state agencies and local tribes in identifying and mapping current movement corridors and for developing management plans to maintain, enhance, and increase connectivity areas.

- Mature and old growth forests, habitat for species, supporting regional biodiversity*  
Protecting old growth - ODFW supports the conservation of all remnant mature old growth forest habitat, removing commercial harvest as their primary purpose, and managing remaining forests to retain their specific characteristics as mature old growth habitat into the future. This policy should apply to all mature old growth habitat types regardless of tree species or commercial value. For example, old growth Oregon White Oak is just as important as old growth Douglas Fir.

Maintaining management of old growth - While ODFW supports Forest Service policy that removes old growth forest from commercial harvest, the agency also recognizes the need for, and encourages, active management of these forests for overall ecosystem health. This need for active management to return fire-prone old growth forests to resiliency is especially important in the drier forest types and riparian areas. ODFW supports thinning operations in

old growth forest only when the goal is to restore a stand to its historic conditions and to promote the development of large trees and old growth conditions. ODFW is concerned that thinning projects have the potential for harm if important habitats for fish and wildlife are not adequately considered and protected. In order to minimize the potential for harm to fish and wildlife, ODFW recommends the Forest Service involve local Tribes and state agencies in the development of forest thinning projects in the early planning stages.

Assumptions regarding forest age and the presence of microhabitat features that support forest species should also be avoided. For example, the Pacific fisher (*Pekania pennanti*) and the endangered Coastal marten (*Martes caurina humboldtensis*) are not dependent on old growth alone but rather structures commonly associated with old growth such as trees with complex structures and snags, which can be created in forests in a variety of age classes. ODFW encourages the Forest Service to consider a diversity of microhabitat features to support a variety of native wildlife species.

Early seral habitats - Many species of birds, mammals, amphibians, and reptiles that are considered dependent on old growth forest habitats also use early seral and non-forested habitats for nesting, roosting, or foraging. The overall health of old growth forests and the species that depend on them is entwined with all forest habitat types. Early seral vegetation habitats have declined significantly on National Forest lands in Oregon during the past 25 years. Due to the lack of early seral habitats, elk forage quality and quantity are poor and population densities have dropped on Oregon's National Forest lands. The decline of this habitat, particularly on federal lands, is a limiting factor in sustaining viable ungulate populations. It also causes elk to move onto private lands resulting in landowner conflicts. To improve forage resources and population densities of coastal ungulates such as Roosevelt elk and black-tailed deer, sufficiently recurrent disturbance management must be incorporated into long-term forest planning on federal lands.

While the NOI focuses on mature and old growth forests, ODFW recommends a landscape scale approach that also emphasizes creation and maintenance of early successional and non-forested habitats such as meadows, wetlands, hardwood woodlands, and grasslands as these habitat features/types have high wildlife value. Many historic meadows have experienced conifer encroachment due to past fire suppression. Early seral conditions and forest openings are highly critical for numerous taxa including invertebrates, birds, amphibians, reptiles, and mammals considered dependent on old growth. Early seral conditions also support deer and elk, the primary prey of the federally threatened gray wolf in Oregon.

Oak habitats - In addition to early seral habitats, oak woodlands are a priority habitat in Oregon highlighted in the Oregon Conservation Strategy. ODFW recommends retaining existing mature and old growth oak stands and trees where they occur and implementing management actions (e.g., thinning of encroaching conifers, thinning of certain oak trees) to increase resistance to wildfire and to promote growth of mid-seral oak stands/trees.

Habitat for and created by beavers - ODFW recognizes the abilities of beaver-modified landscapes in helping to achieve climate change, wildfire resistance/resiliency, and biodiversity objectives. Enhancing appropriate habitats to encourage beaver activity can create watersheds more resistant and resilient to climate change and wildland fire, protecting and increasing biodiversity. As such, ODFW has created and is implementing a [Beaver](#)

[Action Plan](#) to protect and restore beaver habitat and beaver-modified habitat in Oregon. ODFW supports efforts focusing on increasing water availability, beaver forage (hardwood components), reducing road networks, and modifying/defending culverts to promote and support beaver-modified landscapes. In order to identify areas on National Forest lands appropriate for encouraging beaver activity, ODFW recommends the Forest Service undertake a comprehensive effort to identify and map beaver presence, beaver habitat, and areas best-suited for beaver-modified landscapes. The maps should prioritize areas to enhance habitats to encourage the natural dispersal of beavers across the landscapes. While ODFW-approved beaver relocation may be an option and appropriate in some locations, ODFW recommends pursuing other options to promote beaver activity first (e.g. create/improve beaver habitat at the site) as natural dispersal is a strong component of beaver life history and relocations put beavers at risk of predation and facilitate the transmission of catastrophic diseases and pathogens.

[Addressing beaver harvest](#) - ODFW supports a range of practices to address limiting factors to beaver populations and the creation of beaver modified landscapes. These factors should be identified using empirical data and scientifically-supported techniques and then applying the most appropriate practice for addressing those limiting factors. According to the *Subcommittees Summary Ideas for Discussion* Table shared on the Northwest Forest Plan Federal Advisory Committees website, a potential recommendation is “to work with the state on beaver management, including potential closures to commercial and recreational beaver trapping on national forest lands.” ODFW currently works with national forests in Oregon and following the Beaver Action Plan, will continue to work towards shared goals of increasing beaver-modified habitats by implementing practices with clear justification and a direct connection between the action and desired outcomes. Thirteen beaver harvest closures currently occur on some or all of six national forest lands in Oregon. Despite the size and duration of these closures (avg. 48, range 37-59 years), all evidence indicates beaver populations and beaver-modified landscapes have not increased. Before considering any new beaver harvest closures, ODFW recommends the Forest Service review its current beaver harvest closures to quantify the effects the closures have had on achieving established goals.

[Invasive species](#) - ODFW considers [invasive nonnative species](#) a key threat to ecological integrity of old growth forest and effect management must address this critical issue. ODFW is deeply concerned about this threat and supports the aggressive treatment of invasive nonnative species to protect native old growth forest biota. ODFW recommends the Forest Service include in the NWFP Amendment clear management direction for addressing the threat of nonnative invasive species to the ecological integrity of old growth forests.

[Barred Owls](#) - ODFW recognizes the magnitude of impact that barred owls have on Oregon’s native wildlife including the northern spotted owl and supports actions that help to preserve the integrity of native ecosystems in Oregon. Implementation of the barred owl management plan and identification of a strong role for the Forest Service should be a highlighted action for the NWFP to be effective in reducing the decline of spotted owls in Oregon.

#### 4. *Tribal Inclusion*

According to the NOI, the NWFP Amendment intends to enable co-stewardship, including for cultural burning, prescribed fire, and other activities, and will be developed in consultation with Tribes to fulfill treaty obligations and general trust responsibilities. This will require effective collaboration and integration of place-based Tribal Traditional

Knowledge and Western science to inform and prioritize the management policies to guide the restoration and conservation of all forest habitat types to provide cultural, medicinal, and spiritual forest plants and animals important to local tribes.

The indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest actively managed habitat using fire to promote important plant and wildlife species such as oaks, huckleberries, deer, and elk. Collaborative habitat management with Oregon's federally recognized tribes is critical and must allow for creation of early seral habitat that promotes healthy populations of culturally important species including deer, elk, and foraged foods such as huckleberries. Cooperative management that promotes creation of forest openings and early seral habitats will benefit Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities by sustaining healthy populations of culturally important species on tribal and federally managed lands.

ODFW fully supports the Forest Service's efforts for meaningful and sincere Tribal inclusion when developing forest management policies. ODFW recognizes the importance of consulting with tribes and values their traditional ecological knowledge and conservation partnership. ODFW has recently entered into several agreements with federally recognized tribes in Oregon for the cooperative management of fish and wildlife populations. ODFW recommends the Forest Service engage in a greater inclusion of tribal knowledge into federal forest management in this plan amendment and throughout implementation of forest management actions.

#### 5. *Long-term Sustainability of Communities*

Recreation - Recreation and tourism are growing sectors of Oregon's economy and a key opportunity for the northwest forests to support the long-term sustainability of communities. Non-timber resources and values – including recreation such as hunting, fishing, and wildlife viewing – contribute to economic stability at the local, regional and statewide levels and are expected to increase over time. ODFW recommends the Forest Service consider responsible recreation as a key use of National Forests as a means to enhance local economies.

Recreational access - Depending on type and location, recreational areas can have a wide variety of direct and indirect impacts on fish and wildlife and their habitats. Unfettered recreational access to sensitive wildlife areas will have detrimental impacts to critical wildlife resting, foraging, movement, and refugia areas. ODFW recommends that recreational access and opportunities are carefully planned in partnership with local states and tribes to maximize opportunity and minimize impact to fish and wildlife. This may include reducing road density and designing seasonal access opportunities that allow wildlife to recover.

#### 6. *Riparian Reserves*

Improving management - Riparian habitats are critically important on the landscape to support fish and wildlife populations throughout a variety of life stages. For example, riparian habitats provide shading to fish bearing streams, higher humidity amphibian production habitats, wildlife birthing zones, travel corridors for wildlife, nesting and feeding zones for songbirds. The *NWFP's Aquatic Conservation Strategy* established Riparian Reserves around streams and rivers and designated specific Standards and Guidelines for their management. While the Riparian Reserves have provided a higher level of protections to fish and wildlife habitats, these areas have not always received the level of management required to maintain resiliency to uncharacteristic wildfire. Other times they have been over

treated due to threats of fire to communities in the Wildland Urban Interface. When considering wildfire risk and desired future conditions in relation to fire and climate change, a one-size-fits-all approach is not well-suited for riparian habitat. ODFW recommends that the NWFP Amendment considers creation of a new decision making framework to enhance riparian protections while responding to the need to reduce wildfire risk. While acknowledging that land managers must prioritize reducing fire risk to public safety and infrastructure near urban interfaces, ODFW recommends managing all riparian zones to accommodate fish and wildlife beneficial habitat needs. Riparian areas in the wildland urban interface can be managed for native plant species that are of lower fire risk while providing shading for water quality.

Roads - Historically, many road networks have been installed in stream riparian corridors. This has resulted in high levels of timber harvest from stream riparian habitats due to logistical ease of moving timber to the transport route. Many of these segments of stream currently exhibit road-related elevated stream temperatures. ODFW recommends that the Forest Service prioritize restoring Riparian Reserves with stream adjacent road networks to historic stand densities.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, ODFW has a long history of positive working relationships with the Forest Service, and we and look forward to continued work on this amendment and other partnerships. Should you have any questions or seek additional coordination with ODFW on our feedback or your proposal, please contact Sarah Reif, Habitat Division Administrator, at 503-947-6085 or [sarah.j.reif@odfw.oregon.gov](mailto:sarah.j.reif@odfw.oregon.gov). Thank you.

Sincerely,



Sarah Reif  
ODFW Habitat Division Administrator