



For Immediate Release
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**Timber industry concurs with Congressional concerns over flawed spotted owl proposal
Further oversight needed to resolve decades of failed federal forest management policies**

PORTLAND, OR - The timber industry joined those testifying at today's Congressional field hearing in Longview, Washington, in calling on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to reconsider its flawed draft rule to nearly triple the amount of land arbitrarily set aside for the threatened northern spotted owl.

The House Committee on Natural Resources, chaired by Congressman Doc Hastings (R-Pasco), convened today to review federal forest policies and the USFWS' proposal to increase "critical habitat" for the threatened northern spotted owl from 5.3 million acres to nearly 14 million acres across Washington, Oregon and northern California. For the first time the USFWS is proposing to designate state and private forest lands as critical habitat, further threatening struggling rural economies and livelihoods.

"Nearly two decades after first setting aside millions of acres for spotted owl "reserves" at the expense of rural communities and jobs, forest health and other forest-dependent species, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is poised to triple down with a flawed proposal even more devoid of reality," said Tom Partin, President of the American Forest Resource Council (AFRC). "A lack of habitat is not a limiting factor for the spotted owl. Unfortunately, it appears that agency ineptitude in confronting the threats posed by the barred owl and deteriorating forest health conditions on our federal lands and the resulting catastrophic wildfires will seal the fate of the spotted owl."

In 1990, when the spotted owl was listed under the Endangered Species Act, the USFWS cited the loss of old growth forests as its primary threat and identified 7.1 million acres of "suitable" habitat across the Pacific Northwest (this figure included National Parks and Wilderness acres). Now, over twenty years later, the USFWS has suddenly determined that 13,962,449 acres are actually "essential" to the owl, which means many more acres are likely "suitable" for the owl (to reduce the apparent impact of the new proposal this time the figure doesn't even count the National Parks or Wilderness lands already set aside which clearly provide essential habitat for northern spotted owls). This determination has been reached despite a lack of actual owl population data since the USFWS has never conducted comprehensive spotted owl surveys.

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“How the USFWS has concluded that nearly 14 million acres of land are “essential” to spotted owl recovery without even knowing how many spotted owls currently exist and how or if those populations will benefit from the habitat is troubling,” continued Partin. “This drastic proposed increase in essential owl habitat is an indication that the original rationale for listing the owl – a lack of habitat – was completely false, that there are major flaws in the proposal, or both.”

Detailed reviews of the proposal have raised serious questions about its accuracy. For example, in one key spotted owl demographic study area the proposed critical habitat designation does not include 57% of known owl sites and has identified as “essential” 37% of the sites that have never been used by owls in that closely monitored study area. Meanwhile, of the 5.3 million acres designated as critical habitat just four years ago, this new proposal fails to include nearly a quarter of that habitat.

“This critical habitat designation will only further stymie needed forest management activities to reduce overstocking, prevent catastrophic wildfires and provide an economic lifeline to rural communities and county governments reeling from a near shutdown in timber harvests on public lands,” said Partin. “Meanwhile, this proposal will do nothing to stem the continued drastic declines in spotted owl populations brought on by rapidly expanding barred owl populations that have taken over much of the habitat included in this proposal.”

“We hope the Congress will continue to examine how federal administration of the Northwest Forest Plan and Endangered Species Act has failed local economies, forest health and the northern spotted owl itself,” concluded Partin. “The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service should withdraw this proposal until it can demonstrably show that barred owl populations can be controlled and that spotted owl populations will benefit from any habitat designated as critical.”

The American Forest Resource Council represents forest product manufacturers and landowners throughout the west and is based in Portland, Oregon. www.amforest.org