

Beyond the spotted owl: It's time for a new approach in our federal forests

By Tom Partin

The Oregonian's recent article commemorating the 20th anniversary of the listing of the northern spotted owl on the endangered species list exposed the personal, largely hidden agendas of those who have advocated for the owl over the years.

Scientists whose research funding and professional reputations most benefited from national attention being focused on the species were allowed to place their interests ahead of the livelihoods of thousands of Oregonians and, ultimately, the health of the very forests in which the owl lives. The fate of Oregon's national forests, federal Bureau of Land Management lands, rural communities and the forest industry on which all three depend for a sustainable future have been nothing but sacrificial pawns in an elite game played for academic credentials and professional pride.

Oregonians and our entire society have been duped into believing that the owl can be saved by placing 80 percent of our federal forests off-limits to management. No one asked the wood workers and local residents whose intimate knowledge of the local ecology might have provided better information about how things work out there. Now, after 20 years, it's evident that slashing the harvest from our federal lands has not only made our forests into tinder boxes ready to ignite and burn the very habitat the owl needs, but has not kept the owl's numbers from continuing to decline. By listening to the questionable wisdom of self-interested scientists whose livelihoods depend on grants to study the bird, we have come to a place where the owl is in far greater danger from fire and barred owls than from the boogeyman fall guy, logging. It's time for a new approach.

Unfortunately, the new recovery plan for the spotted owl now under development by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is unlikely to be that new approach. The new plan should consider how to protect the owls from their greatest threats, wildfire and barred owls. But being a betting person, I'm willing to lay strong odds that the first recommendation will be to set off-limits to management more of the meager 20 percent of the federal forest land base that is now available for management.

When are Oregonians and our society going to say enough is enough? Our state is on the brink of bankruptcy, unemployment is topping 20 percent in rural Oregon, county payments that are handouts in lieu of cutting timber will expire in 2012, and our forests are ready to burn. What we are doing and have been doing isn't working.

Unfortunately, the sweet face of a spotted owl in the headlines of The Oregonian is now being replaced by the scared faces of unemployed Oregonians uncertain about their future. Like the spotted owl that's being displaced by the barred owl, rural Oregonians are being displaced from their habitat because they can't make a living there. We need to change of direction for both the owl and rural Oregon residents. The answer is to get back to managing our federal forests.

Twenty years is enough time to see that locking up the forests will not save the owl, but it will destroy the economy.