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Protection sought for California Owl

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ASSOCIATED PRESS

Environmentalists asked the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on Wednesday to grant protected status to the California spotted owl, claiming logging threatens the bird's old-growth forest habitat. Seven conservation groups, including the Center for Biological Diversity and the Sierra Nevada Forest Protection Campaign, filed the petition in Sacramento, requesting that the spotted owl be listed as endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

"We're filing this petition because the old-growth forests that the California spotted owl depends on are at risk," said Noah Greenwald, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity.

Also Wednesday, the Bush administration, going against a recommendation from its own scientists, took another step toward removing the marbled murrelet from the threatened species list, which could ultimately increase logging in old-growth forests.

The Fish and Wildlife Service decided Wednesday that marbled murrelets in Washington, Oregon and California, though they continue to decline in population, should not be considered for protection.

The marbled murrelet is a robin-sized seabird that spends most of its life at sea, but flies as much as 50 miles inland to lay a single egg in an old-growth conifer. The California spotted owl, the bird on the petition, lives in mature and old-growth forests in the Sierra Nevada and southern coastal mountains.

The groups said they decided to file Wednesday's petition because the Bush administration altered the Sierra Nevada Framework, allowing increased logging and removing habitat protections.

The Fish and Wildlife Service said the petition would siphon resources away from the service's efforts to protect

other species. The agency already concluded 18 months ago that the spotted owl did not need protected status, citing existing land- and timber-management practices.