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Recovery plan for rare owl in works

Whether move would further restrict logging in endangered birds' habitat is unclear

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TACOMA, WASH. - The shy northern spotted owl — last decade's symbol of the Pacific Northwest logging wars — once again finds itself at the center of the dispute.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has agreed to develop a recovery plan for the rare bird listed as threatened with extinction since 1990. It's too early to say whether it would further restrict logging in forests where the owl lives.

"We are in the very early stages of developing a process for doing this," said Joan Jewett, a U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service spokeswoman in Portland, Ore.

The move comes about nine months after the service reaffirmed its decision to extend Endangered Species Act protection to the creature. And it's been more than a year since a study showed steep drops in Washington's owl population.

The law requires federal officials to figure out ways to revive listed species and define habitat critical to their survival.

The promise of an official recovery plan is part of a modified settlement of a timber industry lawsuit against the federal government nearly three years ago.

According to an agreement approved July 28 by U.S. District Court Judge

Ann Aiken in Eugene, Ore., the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service will prepare an owl plan before the end of 2007.

The service promised to review previously designated owl habitat. While the species act prohibits destruction of nesting areas regardless of who owns them, the only forests officially recognized by the service as owl habitat are federal. Whether an official owl recovery plan would change that and whether it would benefit the owl is unclear.

"I just don't have a clue," said Eric Forsman, a U.S. Forest Service biologist in Corvallis, Ore., who is the region's leading spotted owl expert.

In all, 11,432 banded owls were monitored by researchers who collaborated in the population study. But no one knows how many spotted owls still inhabit the bird's historic range, which extends from Washington to northern California.

Jewett said an interagency group of scientists probably would be drafted to prepare the recovery plan.

Among other things, the Endangered Species Act requires authorities to set a revival goal, she said. An owl recovery plan "makes a lot of sense," said Tom Partin, president of the American Forest Resource Council, a Portland-based group of timber and forest products companies that filed the lawsuit.

Disappearing habitat isn't the only

threat to the owl, he said. Scientists have suggested forest fires, West Nile virus and competition from the more aggressive and adaptable barred owl — a non-native — dim prospects for the spotted owl.

Federal wildlife officials said this summer that they plan to shoot some of the barred owls in a California experiment to see if the spotted owl will rebound.

Foes of logging on federal lands aren't celebrating, despite their support for the Endangered Species Act. "We are ambivalent," Susan Ash, conservation director of the Audubon Society of Portland, leader of six anti-logging groups that weighed in on the lawsuit.

Advocates for the spotted owl don't believe the Bush administration will prepare the kind of recovery plan needed to guarantee the bird a future, she said. "But how can you say no to a recovery plan when one is not in place?"