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## Spotted owl habitat plan ruffles feathers

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service designated more than 8.6 million acres of forests in Arizona and three other states as critical habitat for the Mexican spotted owl, a plan critics say could actually speed the demise of the threatened bird.

Federal officials said Tuesday the proposal complies with a court order to designate habitat for the owl, but environmental groups accuse the agency of ignoring science and favoring the timber industry. The groups say they will ask a judge to reject this plan as he did the last one.

"What the Bush administration has done is found out which areas the timber industry is most interested in and handing them over," said Kieran Suckling, policy director for the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity. "That's the exact opposite of what critical habitat is supposed to be about."

The Clinton administration had proposed including more than 13 million acres of forests as habitat for the owl, which was listed as threatened in 1993. The Interior Department trimmed nearly 9 million acres from that plan after Bush was elected, but a federal judge ordered the government to try again.

The latest proposal covers about 4 million acres in Arizona, 2.2 million acres in

Utah, 2.1 million acres in New Mexico and a little more than 322,000 acres in Colorado. The habitat areas are scattered over 25 parcels in Arizona, with the largest in the state's northwestern corner and along its southeastern border.

Although the wildlife service defended its proposal, the agency expressed clear doubts about the value of designating habitat areas. It noted several times in a news release and other materials that critical habitat "provides little additional protection to most listed species."

The fish and wildlife service can designate critical habitat areas as part of a recovery plan for a threatened or endangered species. A critical habitat does not carry the same weight as a wilderness or park designation, nor does it affect land ownership. It adds a new layer of review for projects that would disturb the area.

Suckling said the new habitat plan carefully excludes more than 150 areas earmarked for logging projects, claiming that they are important to wildfire protection efforts. He said the recovery plan for the owl would permit removal of small trees to reduce the threat of fire.

"They want to hand the last remaining old growth over to the timber industry," he said. "The fire-hazard issue is a smokescreen."

Elizabeth Slown, a spokesman for the wildlife service at its regional office in

Albuquerque, said the areas excluded to allow tree removal account for fewer than 135,000 acres of the 8.6 million-acre habitat plan.

She said including the land could hamper work already under way and that requiring a review to consider the owl would duplicate earlier studies. Those studies found little threat to the owl but suggested that delaying tree removal could risk human health and safety, she said.