

11. ENDANGERED SPECIES: Environmentalists see politics behind spotted owl recovery plan

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Prodded by litigation from both sides of the issue, the Fish and Wildlife Service last week finally released a draft recovery plan for the northern spotted owl. Much to the chagrin of environmental groups, the plan sets no specific population target and would allow federal land managers to choose what habitats to designate for protection.

The owl has been at the center of a long debate between the timber industry and environmentalists on how to manage old-growth forests in the Pacific Northwest. But recent events in Washington, notably the abrupt resignation this week of Julie McDonald from her job as assistant secretary of Fish, Wildlife and Parks for the Department of the Interior, added a distinct political tinge to the issue.

MacDonald was the subject of a scathing report last month from the Interior Office of Inspector General that found she had violated at least two aspects of federal code. The IG report found she used her post to intervene in endangered species listings and critical habitat decisions and also had sent information to third parties so they could use it to challenge the service in court.

Fish and Wildlife has released a recovery plan for the northern spotted owl, but critics say the plan is tainted by political interference. Photo courtesy of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Rather than a scientifically based program for recovery of a threatened species, Noah Greenwald of the Center for Biological Diversity termed the spotted owl plan as "one more example of that kind of political interference."

He alleged that the recommendations from a formal recovery advisory team had initially included specific habitat protections but that the plan was taken over by senior agency officials who backed away from reserves and "leave it up to the agencies to protect at will" under the guise of employing "adaptive management" techniques.

The criticism that the plan is more political than scientific was echoed by Dominick DellaSala, an environmental scientist who served on the recovery team. "The political interference in the science derailed the team from meeting that objective," DellaSala told the Seattle *Post-Intelligencer* newspaper last week. "This administration has manipulated the process."

The draft plan establishes five goals for spotted owl recovery -- including a stabilized population. But the agency said it omitted a specific target for the population because it would be too expensive to count the owls.

The draft plan offers two options for owl management. One identifies "habitat blocks" comprising 7.7 million acres where officials would concentrate research and habitat management. The other would establish habitat blocks but not specify their sizes or locations. It would offer rules for the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management for designating owl conservation areas.

The less-defined second option was requested by Interior Department political appointees and other high-level officials in Washington, D.C., said Dave Wesley, leader of the agency's spotted owl recovery team. But Wesley defended the option, saying it would allow land managers to respond to landscape changes caused by invasive species or movements of animals.

In the recovery plan, habitat destruction has taken a back seat to competition from the barred owl as the greatest single threat to spotted owls. The plan proposed a program for federal land managers to remove or kill barred owls.

"We need a recovery plan that is dynamic and can change, and I think this is a great first step," said Ren Lohofener, director of the agency's Pacific region.

Greenwald of CBD disagreed, contending, "There's a pretty broad consensus that habitat protection is key to the survival of the spotted owls. The best thing to do is to maintain the Northwest Forest Plan and preserve old-growth forests."

Reporter Allison Winter contributed to this story.