

New plan to restore spotted owl to health gets heavily altered

By [ROBERT McCLURE](#)

A high-level team of Bush administration appointees in Washington, D.C. -- including a former timber-industry lobbyist -- ordered changes in a plan produced by scientists and other experts to save the Pacific Northwest's spotted owl.

The result, revealed Thursday, could whittle away old-growth forests protected on the owl's behalf.

A save-the-owl plan proposed by a panel of Northwest-based federal and state wildlife officials, environmentalists and timber-industry scientists would set aside specific blocks of old-growth forest to protect the imperiled owls.

But the D.C.-based officials added a second possibility that would not reserve any land for the owls' recovery. They would leave those decisions to the U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management -- agencies that do not specialize in helping imperiled species.

Under the bureaucrats' option, more than 700,000 acres of habitat suitable for the threatened owls could be left unprotected, according to one simulation included in the documents unveiled Thursday.

Records also show that the D.C. group ordered the Northwest panel to "de-emphasize" the landmark Northwest Forest Plan adopted under the Clinton administration to save spotted owls and other species that thrive in old-growth forests.

"We're faced with a document that doesn't measure up to one of the key provisions of the Endangered Species Act, which is that the recovery plan must be based on best available science," said Dominick DellaSala, an environmental scientist tapped by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for the Northwest-based owl recovery team.

"The political interference in the science derailed the (Northwest) team from meeting that objective," he said. "This administration has manipulated the process."

After the Northwest-based team came up with its proposal for large swaths of protected owl habitat, something unusual happened. Fish and Wildlife assembled a "Washington Oversight Committee."

Records state that the group included Mark Rey, the agriculture undersecretary in charge of the Forest Service who previously served as a timber-industry lobbyist; and Julie McDonald, the deputy assistant Interior secretary trained as a civil engineer who sparked controversy last year by overruling Fish and Wildlife scientists on which species deserve legal protection.

The D.C. bureaucrats' insertion into a process usually handled within Fish and Wildlife is significant because of its importance to owls, whose numbers are dropping faster than scientists expected. But critics say it's important on a broader scale because it is part of a larger pattern of the Bush administration smacking down advice from scientists and others in the field.

Ren Lohofener, Pacific regional director for Fish and Wildlife, defended the D.C. officials' involvement, saying the agency seeks ideas from many people inside and outside government. In this case, he said, it would make sense to keep the recovery plan "flexible" so that it can change over time.

"Any recovery plan is a collaborative process," Lohofener said. "We take new ideas."

Of the Oversight Committee's creation, he said: "Is it usual? Probably not, in that most species don't have this history of interest" by the public and politicians.

High Vickery, a spokesman for the Interior Department, which oversees Fish and Wildlife, said high-level government interest in the owls dates at least to the involvement of President Clinton in the early 1990s. Clinton set in motion the process that produced the Northwest Forest Plan that has guided owl-recovery efforts ever since.

"All the way down the line, the system is set up so there is political oversight," Vickery said. "That's the way government works. We have a presidential election. We get a whole new crew of political appointees to be our bosses. ... The political appointees' job is to oversee the agencies."

Fish and Wildlife is designated by the Endangered Species Act as the agency in charge of helping most imperiled species to recover. It appoints a "recovery team" to fashion a plan to help a threatened species bounce back.

It is not unusual for Fish and Wildlife brass and the agency's lawyers to change recovery plans. Sometimes their bosses at Interior get involved.

What's quite unusual in this case is that a committee dominated by Bush administration political appointees was convened to pick apart the proposal. They insisted on proposing an alternate recovery plan.

"They basically told us from that point what the recovery plan should look like," said recovery team member Tim Cullinan, a wildlife biologist with Audubon Washington.

Kieran Suckling of the Center for Biological Diversity, who has clashed with both the Clinton and Bush administrations over endangered-species protections, called the move "really outrageous...." Every other plan ... they don't put a whole new bureaucratic team in place to rewrite it."

The newly proposed plan stemmed ultimately from a lawsuit filed by the timber industry, which complained that the owl's status had never been reviewed as required under the Endangered Species Act.

Chris West, vice president of the Portland-based timber-industry group American Forest Resource Council, said the plan backed by the D.C. officials offers a better chance at helping the owls. The reason: it will allow quicker changes to deal with fires, tree diseases, and an interloper in the spotted owls' territory known as the barred owl.

"The environmentalists are stuck in the old paradigm that the spotted owls are depending on old-growth," West said. "You can't lock up the old-growth, because ultimately the landscape will change."

Vickery, the Interior spokesman, said adding the second option to the recovery plan should be viewed positively.

"The idea that we shouldn't have raised the option, shouldn't have given the people the opportunity to talk about it, doesn't make sense to me," Vickery said. "If people have legitimate concerns about that second option, this is the time to raise them."