

Biden administration will reconsider northern spotted owl forest protection rollbacks

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Feb. 22, 2021 11:21 a.m. Updated: Feb. 22, 2021 2:11 p.m.

The U.S. Interior Department is delaying and reviewing the Trump administration's last-minute roll-back of federal protections for the imperiled northern spotted owl, which called for slashing protections from millions of acres of Northwest forests.

On Jan. 15, just days before leaving office, the Trump administration [published a final rule revising Endangered Species Act protections](#) for the northern spotted owl. The rule lifted critical-habitat protections for the bird from 3.4 million acres in Oregon, Washington and California. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife's had proposed a far more modest revision, seeking to remove critical habitat status from a little over 200,000 acres in 15 counties in Oregon.

A northern spotted owl in the old growth forest of Oregon.

Todd Sonflieth / OPB

Earlier this month, Western Democrats led by Oregon Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley [sent a letter to the Interior Department](#) requesting an immediate federal review into the decision to slash millions of acres of the owls' critical habitat. The letter also questioned whether the previous Interior Secretary David Bernhardt ignored scientific recommendations made by staff.

"David Bernhardt ended his corrupt and destructive tenure at Interior with this parting blow to science and the public interest, raising even more questions about scientific meddling by Trump political appointees," Wyden said in an emailed statement. "I'm glad to see Biden's Interior understands the urgency of stopping this dangerous rule from going into effect and is committed to science, not corporate interests."

Wyden said he hopes other Trump administration rollbacks will be permanently reversed to protect the northern spotted owl and other threatened species.

On Monday, the Interior Department said it will be reviewing the changes and delaying the effective date of the rule from March 16 to April 15.

“Robust critical habitat protections are essential to ensuring the survival of the northern spotted owl. The Trump administration’s arbitrary and sweeping reduction of protected areas was conducted without public input or scientific basis. Interior is reviewing the Trump administration’s rollback of northern spotted owl critical habitat designations to adequately protect this threatened species and the habitat it needs for recovery,” U.S. Department of Interior spokesperson said in an emailed statement.

The Center for Biological Diversity’s Endangered Species Director Noah Greenwald said it’s clear, based on the timing of the Trump administration decision last month, that it wasn’t driven by science provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

“I don’t have a smoking gun document that says that but I think it’s hard to interpret the chain of events in any other way,” He said.

Greenwald said the next steps most likely would lead to a new rulemaking process. Something that could at least take a year to finish.

A spokesperson for the American Forest Resources Council, which represents forest-products companies in the Pacific Northwest, Northern California and Montana, declined to comment.

In December, protection efforts for the northern spotted owl received a separate blow to the species’ chances for recovery when the former administration [declined to “uplist” the owl from threatened status to endangered](#) under the Endangered Species Act. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said the species warranted uplisting but it considered other species on the list to be higher priorities.

A notice is expected to be published in the Federal Register in the next few days.