

Northern Spotted Owl: USFWS revising critical habitat

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is finalizing a revised designation of critical habitat under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) for the northern spotted owl.

"After a thorough review of scientific and commercial information and evaluation of public comments received on the proposed rule, we are withdrawing the January 15, 2021 rule which would have excluded 3.4 million acres of designated critical habitat through section 4(b)(2) of the ESA," the USFWS states in a release. "This final rule excludes 204,294 acres of the 9.6 million acres of critical habitat, which is approximately 2% of the 2012 northern spotted owl designation."

The action will help conserve and recover spotted owls by identifying habitat needed for recovery of northern spotted owls in the long-term, according to the release. Additionally, active management of forests and invasive barred owl populations to make forest ecosystems healthier and more resilient to disease, insect outbreaks and the effects of climate change, such as increased frequency of droughts and catastrophic wildfires, will be vital.

“The importance of maintaining high quality habitat for northern spotted owls cannot be overstated in light of the challenges we’re facing with climate change and increasing competition from the invasive barred owl,” USFWS’s Regional Director for the Columbia-Pacific Northwest Robyn Thorson said. “This designation provides a healthy and resilient landscape for the spotted owl and other native Northwest wildlife while still supporting sustainable timber harvest.”

This exclusion includes 184,133 acres of Bureau of Land Management-administered lands allocated for timber harvest in 15 Oregon counties. Their revised Resource Management Plans for western Oregon incorporate key aspects of the Northern Spotted Owl Recovery Plan that will continue to help conserve and improve habitat for the owl over time on these lands.

Additionally, approximately 20,000 acres of Indian lands are included in the exclusion. These are lands recently transferred under the Western Oregon Tribal Fairness Act to the Confederated Tribes of the Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians and the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians.

The northern spotted owl is protected as a threatened species under the ESA, and a critical habitat designation identifies those areas that are essential to recovery of the species. The USFWS found that the 3.4 million acres excluded in the January 15, 2021, revised designation would have left too little habitat to conserve the species, ultimately resulting in the extinction of the northern spotted owl.

Critical habitat does not provide additional protections for a species on non-federal lands unless proposed activities involve federal funding or permitting. Critical habitat designations also do not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, reserve, preserve or other conservation area, nor does it allow the government or public to access private lands, according to the USFWS.

The final rule is available online at: <https://www.federalregister.gov/public-inspection/current>.