

Statement released on managing invasive barred owls to protect at-risk spotted owls

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is announcing its final environmental impact statement analyzing proposed barred owl management alternatives to protect northern and California spotted owls in Washington, Oregon and California from invasive barred owls. The Service's preferred alternative is the implementation of a proposed Barred Owl Management Strategy, which would result in the annual removal of less than one-half of 1% of the current North American barred owl population.

Northern spotted owl populations are rapidly declining due to competition with invasive barred owls and habitat loss. California spotted owls, which are proposed for ESA listing, face a similar risk as barred owl populations continue to move south into their range.

"Barred owl management is not about one owl versus another," said Service Oregon Office state supervisor Kessina Lee. "Without actively managing barred owls, northern spotted owls will likely go extinct in all or the majority of their range, despite decades of collaborative conservation efforts."

If the proposed strategy is adopted and fully implemented, lethal removal of barred owls by trained professionals would occur in less than half of the areas where spotted and invasive barred owls co-exist within the northern spotted owl's range; and would limit their invasion into the California spotted owl's range. Public hunting of barred owls is not allowed under the proposed strategy and lead ammunition will not be used for any lethal removal actions.

“Barred owl removal, like all invasive species management, is not something the Service takes lightly,” said Lee. “The Service has a legal responsibility to do all it can to prevent the extinction of the federally listed northern spotted owl and support its recovery, while also addressing significant threats to California spotted owls.”

Barred owls are native to eastern North America but started moving west of the Mississippi River at the beginning of the 20th century. This expansion was likely due to human-induced changes in the Great Plains and northern boreal forest. As a result, barred owls now surpass northern spotted owls in numbers across most of California, Oregon, and Washington.

If the proposed strategy is adopted, the Service would receive a permit under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. The Service could then designate interested Tribes, federal and state agencies, companies, or specific landowners to implement barred owl management on their lands if actions are consistent with the strategy, conditions of the permit, and state laws and policies. Those who implement the strategy will be accountable for annual monitoring and reporting.

The final EIS and proposed strategy reflect the input received throughout the scoping and public comment process, as well as feedback from cooperating agencies and Tribes. The Service expects to announce a final record of decision on the proposed strategy at least 30 days after the formal publication of the final EIS in the Federal Register.

More information is available on the Service's barred owl management website, including the draft and final EIS, proposed strategy and frequently asked questions. The final EIS will be available in the coming days in the Federal Register at <https://www.regulations.gov> at Docket No. FWS-R1-ES-2022-0074.