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USFWS: Northern spotted owls are endangered, but we're too busy to help

Today, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service published a [finding](#) on the northern spotted owl's listing status, spurred by a [lawsuit filed last week](#) by wildlife advocates. The finding states "reclassification of the northern spotted owl from a threatened species to an endangered species is warranted but precluded by higher priority actions to amend the Lists of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants. We will develop a proposed rule to reclassify the northern spotted owl as our priorities allow."

The advocates' [complaint](#), filed last week, came after the Service failed to take multiple actions required by the Endangered Species Act to protect the northern spotted owl from extinction over the course of nearly a decade.

"On the one hand, you have biologists at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service acknowledging that northern spotted owls are extremely close to extinction and more must be done to prevent the extinction of the species," said Susan Jane Brown, attorney at the Western Environmental Law Center. "On the other, you have the Trump administration catering to the demands of an out-of-touch timber industry. Placing commercial interests ahead of the continued existence of this iconic species is shameful, and thankfully, not permitted by the Endangered Species Act."

"While we are glad that the Service has acknowledged the reality—northern spotted owls are rapidly going extinct—today's announcement is also illustrative of the failures of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service," said Tom Wheeler, executive director of the Environmental Protection Information Center. "The Service only acted under threat of lawsuit and the agency still managed to squirm out of any real action by complaining it has too much work to do. Delay and inaction are precisely how we are driving the spotted owl to extinction."

Timber harvesting in the Northwest has resulted in a widespread loss of spotted owl habitat across its range, which was a main reason for prompting the listing of the species in 1990. Owls depend on habitat provided by the dense canopy of mature and old-growth forests; unfortunately, those forests are still a target for logging throughout the bird's historic range. The northern spotted owl is already functionally extinct in its northernmost range, with only one recognized breeding pair left in British Columbia.

"We know that climate change and the loss of high-quality habitat are imminent threats to the spotted owl," said Joseph Vaile, climate director at Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center. "If we wait years or decades for federal officials to address these issues, it will be too late."

“The owl is biologically determined to be endangered, yet the agency continues to find excuses do nothing,” said Kimberly Baker, executive director of the Klamath Forest Alliance. “The Endangered Species Act demands action from the Service, not excuses.”

"The Fish and Wildlife Service says the spotted owl deserves protection as an endangered species but can't be bothered to actually do it," said Doug Heiken with Oregon Wild. "This makes no sense. The Service has already made the finding that the owl is endangered of extinction. The owl is already listed as threatened. The owl already has critical habitat, and already has a recovery plan. How much more work is it to move the check mark from the threatened column to the endangered column and start giving the owl the protection it deserves?"

“Despite today’s announcement that the northern spotted owl is ‘unofficially endangered’ and likely to go extinct, the Service has prioritized working against its recovery under the Trump administration,” Brown said. In August 2020, the Service settled a timber industry lawsuit by proposing to [eliminate more than 200,000 acres](#) of northern spotted owl critical habitat. Before January 20, 2021, the Service will make a decision that may diminish designated northern spotted owl critical habitat on a scale that dwarfs the aforementioned reduction proposal. “We will wait and see what further decisions the Service makes regarding the fate of the spotted owl before deciding how we move forward in light of today’s announcement,” Brown said.

In response to a court order, in 1990 the Service listed the northern spotted owl as threatened, citing low and declining populations, limited and declining habitat, competition from barred owls, and other factors in the bird’s plight. Even after its listing, northern spotted owl populations have declined by 70%, and the rate of decline has increased.

Additional background from to the Service’s announcement today:

“Habitat loss was the primary factor leading to the listing of the northern spotted owl as a threatened species, and it continues to be a stressor on the subspecies due to the lag effects of past habitat loss, continued timber harvest, wildfire, and a minor amount from insect and forest disease outbreaks.”

“On non-Federal lands, State regulatory mechanisms have not prevented the continued decline of nesting/roosting and foraging habitat; the amount of northern spotted owl habitat on these lands has decreased considerably over the past two decades, including in geographic areas where Federal lands are lacking. On Federal lands, the Northwest Forest Plan has reduced habitat loss and allowed for the development of new northern spotted owl habitat; however, the combined effects of climate change, high severity wildfire, and past management practices are changing forest ecosystem processes and dynamics, and the expansion of barred owl populations is altering the capacity of intact habitat to support northern spotted owls.”

“Based on our review of the best available scientific and commercial information pertaining to the factors affecting the northern spotted owl, we find that the stressors acting on the subspecies and its habitat, particularly rangewide competition from the nonnative barred owl and high-severity wildfire, are of such imminence, intensity, and magnitude to indicate that the northern spotted owl is now in danger of extinction throughout all of its range. Our status review indicates that the northern spotted owl meets the definition of an endangered species. Therefore, in accordance with sections 3(6) and 4(a)(1) of the Act, we find that listing the northern spotted owl as an endangered species is warranted throughout all of its range. However, work on

a reclassification for the northern spotted owl has been, and continues to be, precluded by work on higher-priority actions—which includes listing actions with statutory, court-ordered, or court approved deadlines and final listing determinations.”

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