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Conservation Groups Move to Rebuild Spotted Owl Population and Protect Old-Growth Forests

Effort begun to reverse weak habitat protection and flawed recovery plan in Pacific Northwest

Washington, DC -- Conservation groups challenged inadequate protections for northern spotted owls today in federal district court in Washington, D.C. The groups asked the court for permission to intervene in an ongoing timber industry lawsuit which is aimed at weakening owl protections in order to log more western mature and old-growth forests.

The conservation groups say the Bush administration violated the Endangered Species Act when it slashed the amount of forest protected as critical habitat for the owls by about 1.6 million acres. The Bush administration reduced protected habitat in spite of warnings from scientists that spotted owl populations have been declining by 4 percent a year for the past 15 years. Much of the decline in owl populations is due to the logging of mature and old-growth forests needed by owls to survive.

The Bush administration justified reducing owl critical habitat on the basis of a scientifically discredited plan to recover owls, which the conservation groups are also challenging. This is part of an overall trend of political interference in science decisions by the Administration, with dozens of cases currently under investigation.

“The critical habitat reduction and unscientific recovery plan ignore years of scientific study and public opinion finding our old-growth forests need to be protected,” said Kristen Boyles, an attorney with Earthjustice representing 18 national and regional conservation organizations in the legal action. “We need to reverse these actions and restore scientifically based protection for Pacific Northwest wildlife and natural areas.”

“We are pressing for a more sensible approach to managing Northwest forests,” said Shawn Cantrell, Executive Director with Seattle Audubon. “Protecting mature and old-growth forests is about owls and more -- it is key to protecting rivers and streams, drinking water, and outdoor recreation, a major economic contributor for local communities across the region.”

The Fish and Wildlife Service listed northern spotted owls as a threatened species in 1990 and originally protected its critical habitat in 1992. Only 15-20 percent of the original old-growth forests remain throughout the Pacific Northwest. In addition to providing critical habitat for spotted owls, salmon, steelhead and other species, mature and old growth forests are important sources of clean water and help reduce global warming.

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