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Spotted owls to be made optional?

Timber industry lawsuit may lead to reduced spotted owl habitat

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to eliminate 1.5 million acres of critical habitat for the northern spotted owl.

The owl is the canary in the coal mine for the Pacific Northwest's old-growth forests. It prefers old growth to nest in, and thrives best in ancient forests.

The new rule, published in the Federal Register on June 12, would cut critical habitat for the spotted owl from its current 6.9 million acres to 5.4 million acres, a reduction of 22 percent. (The public comment period for the rule runs until August 13, 2007.)

"The spotted owl is faced with multiple threats to its existence," said Forests Forever executive director Paul Hughes. "The last thing it needs is a reduction in its most important habitat."

The reduction in critical habitat was the result of the settlement of a lawsuit brought by the timber industry. It was based on the recommendations of the 2007 Draft Recovery Plan for the Spotted Owl, which would open up old-growth forest to logging.

The plan introduced a new alternative, insisted on by political appointees who were not satisfied with the initial plan drawn up by a panel of scientists. The new

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alternative would set aside less protected habitat for the owl than is currently offered under the North West Forest Plan.

Scientists on the owl recovery team report that they were overruled by the political appointees, and say that the new alternative is unsupported by the best available science.

By limiting protected habitat for the spotted owl and allowing logging back in to old-growth forests in the Northwest, the Bush administration is continuing its push to increase logging on federal lands. Rather than make decisions based on the desires of political appointees, the administration should base its plans on sound science.

“The owl deserves better than to be sacrificed to this administration’s lust for logging,” Hughes said. “The Fish and Wildlife Service should withdraw the draft plan, and put together one backed by real science and real scientists.”