



Fish and Wildlife Commission Presentation Summary Sheet

Meeting date:

12/13/2024

Agenda item:

Spotted owl resilience in Washington – Briefing

Presenter(s):

Emilie Kohler, Spotted Owl Species Lead, Diversity Division, Wildlife Program

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Background summary:

The northern spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis caurina*; NSO) is in steep decline in Washington and across its range (see [Periodic Status Review for the Northern Spotted Owl in Washington, 2024](#)). Without immediate intervention, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) and our conservation partners expect NSO to be functionally extinct from Washington within a decade. WDFW is committed to preventing the loss of this flagship species of old growth forests in Washington. There are no simple or straightforward paths to recovery left for NSO; WDFW, our conservation partners, and the public are left with only the most difficult options available to support recovery of the species.

WDFW's intended approach for NSO resilience and recovery includes three major efforts (none of which are enough in isolation to recover NSO):

- **Maintaining habitat** for NSO through support for the [Northwest Forest Plan \(NWFP\)](#) and participation in the NWFP Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and amendment process to ensure adequate consideration of spotted owl persistence and recovery.
 - Maintenance of old growth habitat is needed for long-term NSO recovery.
 - The NWFP was established in 1994 as a landscape approach to protect threatened and endangered species while providing for sustainable timber harvest. The Forest Service is currently developing an amendment to the NWFP that would apply to units in Washington's Pacific Northwest Region (Region 6).
 - The amendment will incorporate new information including the federal 2011 NSO recovery plan, the 2012 federal critical habitat designation for NSO, and the 2021 revision of the critical habitat designation.
 - Part of the amendment seeks to improve resistance and resilience to wildfire, support adaptation to and mitigation of climate change, and address management needs of mature and old growth forests with related ecosystem habitat improvement.

- WDFW plans to provide comments on the draft EIS.
- **Exploring NSO population augmentation** through analysis of potential methods such as captive rearing, captive breeding, and/or translocation.
 - WDFW and partners are assessing the feasibility of a captive breeding/rearing and translocation program for NSO along with the associated costs in Washington.
 - WDFW is compiling existing data to develop a model that simulates NSO abundance, distribution, movement, and changes in genetic diversity, which will inform future conservation strategies.
 - WDFW has begun discussion with zoo partners and the British Columbia NSO breeding program to understand if a NSO captive breeding/rearing program in the United States is feasible and the right path for recovery.
- **Implementing barred owl (*Strix varia*) management** following the [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service \(USFWS\)'s Barred Owl Management Strategy](#).
 - Barred owl interference and competition is the greatest direct factor driving the current and continued population decline of NSO and may limit the positive effects of other conservation actions in the near term.
 - First documented in Washington in 1972, barred owls are recent arrivals to the West Coast from eastern North America. Their expansion was enabled through alteration of the landscape by European settlers.
 - Barred owls are considered an invasive species due to their highly disruptive and destructive effects on native species and ecosystems. Despite their similar appearance, barred owls and NSO do not occupy a similar niche, and barred owls do not simply “replace” NSO in the food web. As a generalist, novel predator, barred owls capture a greater proportion of diurnal, terrestrial, and aquatic prey than NSO. Increasing barred owl densities and their replacement of NSO in old growth ecosystems have the potential to exert enough predation and competitive pressure to imperil other rare species.
 - Landscape-level experiments to assess the effects of competitive interactions between barred owls and NSO indicate strong positive responses by NSO to the removal of barred owls. This includes increased NSO survival rates, dispersal, and recruitment.
 - The approach in the USFWS's Barred Owl Management Strategy is the strategic, targeted, humane removal of barred owls around occupied or recently occupied NSO territories (not in or near cities or towns) and designating multiple management areas in NSO habitat that can each support 20-50 pairs of owls.
 - At the maximum level of implementation, the barred owl management strategy would impact less than one percent of the barred owl population in North America, while helping to prevent the extinction of NSO in Washington.

Staff recommendation:

Briefing only.

Policy issue(s) and expected outcome:

Briefing only.

Fiscal impacts of agency implementation:

Briefing only.

Public involvement process used and what you learned:

Briefing only.

Action requested and/or proposed next steps:

Briefing only.

Draft motion language:

Briefing only.

Post decision communications plan:

Briefing only.
