

**Remarks for NSO Review Meeting
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By:

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Introduction:

Hello and Thank you Steven and SEI for inviting me to speak today. My name is Susan Ash and I'm the Assistant Director of Conservation for the Audubon Society of Portland, an organization founded in 1902 with 10,000 current members. I have worked on forest conservation issues in Oregon for over three years and hold a Masters' of Science Degree in Forestry. I am here today representing a broad coalition of conservation groups highly concerned with the protection of the NSO (NSO) and the old growth forests they depend on for survival. Many of these groups were active in the NSO issue long before the species was protected under the Endangered Species Act. Most representatives from these groups were not able to be here today but plan on attending future meetings.

First, I would like to preface my remarks by saying that until two days ago I did not know that I was going to be asked to speak at this meeting so I had little time to prepare a formal presentation. Therefore I am going to informally outline some issues of concern we have identified regarding the 5 topic areas the panel is examining. I look forward to either giving a more formal, detailed presentation to you all at a future meeting myself, or having one of my colleagues do so.

General Comments:

Some general comments before I move on to the 5 topic areas. First and foremost, we believe that the populations of NSOs are declining across their entire habitat range, especially in Washington and on the Olympic Peninsula, and that stricter protections for the species in order to avoid extinction are warranted.

Second, we are pleased with SEI's selection of panel members and with their decision to allow this to be an open process. We do have concerns, however that

federal biologists from the Pacific Northwest were precluded from being panelists since they are some of the foremost experts on NSO issues. Any and every way to utilize their expertise should be employed by the panelists. We are also concerned with the lengthiness of the American Forest Resource Council's and other plaintiffs' request for an extension until November 15. We recognize a need for an extension in order to enable the panel to review the metanalysis results to be discussed at the January demographics workshop, but such a lengthy extension appears to be politically motivated. This review is supposed to be about science, not politics.

Topic Areas:

Habitat Associations – My observations on the topics of habitat associations and habitat distribution will likely overlap a bit. In general, more emphasis needs to be placed on habitat issues than has been previously. Specific geographic areas should be considered and evaluated IN ADDITION to looking at the range of the spotted owl as a whole. Current data available comes from limited demographic data points; large, scattered survey areas that do not represent all of the NSO's range and have shrunk significantly since 1994. The panel and the USFWS should look at the data alone, at the scale it was collected, and not attempt to draw conclusions on the entire habitat range from that data exclusively.

We feel there is substantial science showing that NSOs are still an old-growth dependent species. They are being forced out of old growth forests for a variety of reasons including timber harvest practices and competition from barred owls. We recognize that in some parts of their range, NSOs are being found in younger stands of trees but we feel that this evidence cannot be extrapolated to mean that NSOs are surviving and thriving in the absence of late seral, old growth forests. We feel the reason owls are being found in younger stands of trees is likely due to habitat fragmentation and/or competition and the simple fact that there isn't much habitat left for them.

Management practices must be closely evaluated to analyze barriers to dispersal of owls and their associated habitat. Management practices fragment habitat and prevent NSO dispersal.

Habitat Distribution – We understand the panel and the USFWS are looking at geographic variation issues on both private and public lands, concentrating on public lands. We have some concerns with a variety of habitat conservation plans (HCPs) and will make these available to you at a later date. A significant problem with HCPs is that they are interpreted by the landowners who create them. They are habitat sinks and can act as barriers to NSO fecundity and productivity. The panel should look at existing HCPs and critical habitat and determine if the habitat is appropriately dedicated. HCPs and critical habitat are designed to maintain populations and allow for dedicated NSO habitat rather than to help with

recovery or dispersal of the populations; huge missing pieces. We must recognize the importance of critical habitat for recovery of the NSO and that there is a need to expand critical habitat of the NSO for recovery as mandated by the Endangered Species Act. HCPs designed without recovery and dispersal in mind do not provide adequate suitable nesting, roosting and foraging habitat to young owls, which can be fatal. There is a dire need for the designation of core areas for nesting, roosting, and foraging for the NSO across its range.

Currently, Late Successional Reserves (LSRs) are fragmented and inadequate for NSO habitat and likely won't be for 100 years. Yet within the next 25-40 years the Northwest Forest Plan seeks to log a million acres of nesting, roosting and foraging habitat in the matrix that NSOs are currently using. Existing province level BiOPs show that more than half the NSOs are outside of these reserves.

There is a real problem with issues of take on private lands right now. We feel that the USFWS should calculate numbers of incidental take and make these number available to the panel. We are particularly concerned that the current system for protecting spotted owls on private and state lands is deficient and essentially broken, especially in the state of Washington where the Washington DNR has proposed to double the harvest on state lands. Oregon is following closely behind.

NSOs typically disperse down the Pacific Northwest from Canada, but Canadian populations of NSOs are on the brink of extinction. The state of Washington's populations are following closely behind. Geographically, NSOs are moving into the Willamette Valley in Oregon, the very place where most timber harvesting is now occurring, creating even more pressure on NSO populations and more reasons to designate habitat for recovery in the areas where the owls are still found.

We understand that the USFWS will be responsible for measuring habitat loss, though the panel will likely have input? We are concerned that the USFWS will not be looking at habitat loss on a site-specific basis, i.e., habitat loss through individual timber sales, fires, etc. In regards to fire, a large amount of NSO habitat has been lost. We understand that the plan is to do a "brush stroke" analysis of study areas and come up with a percentage of acres of habitat loss. They will also be looking at existing BiOps. We do not believe this type of analysis is adequate. BiOps do not tell us where NSO habitat acres being lost are located, nor do they establish overlap between demography data, habitat loss, and population trends. They permit tens of thousands of acres of habitat loss but do not tell us where that loss is. We need to know where these lost acres are in order to determine if these lost acres affect population viability. An added issue is that the definitions of NSO owl habitat are different for every agency and landowner and most of these definitions originated in the '80's. The habitat definition issue must be addressed and site-specific surveys using updated

definitions must be conducted in order to help truly determine acreage lost from timber sales.

MAP – I brought with me today a (rather large!) map produced by the Conservation Biology Institute on behalf of the World Wildlife Fund. The map, titled “Late Seral Forests of the Pacific Northwest” shows detailed imagery of the remaining late seral forests in the Pacific Northwest. Along the coast, you can see we have lost almost all of our late seral forests. The blow-ups of specific areas make this point even more dramatically. The WWF and CBI have recently analyzed the rate of loss of late seral forests since the 1970’s. They have found very significant losses throughout the range of the NSO. They currently have two manuscripts in review for publication and a third on its way in January. I will provide these papers to you before your April meeting

Bottom of the map has percentages lost by region.

Demography –

The demography issue is very technical. We are glad that the panelists will be able to review the results from the 2004 demographics workshop and that the USFWS will be able to use these results when making a final determination about the status of the NSO. We are concerned, however that a meta analysis, by its nature, does not look at threats. The Endangered Species Act is based on threats. We feel that the USFWS should make a distinction between changes in threats when looking at the metapopulation analysis and the NSO population numbers.

We understand the panel’s task is to articulate the relationship between lambda (the statistic used to calculate/determine rate of population change) and what is actually happening to the population as a whole. There is substantial variance in lambda and controversy over lambda’s accuracy and how it should be calculated. Specifically, there are two ways to calculate lambda that paint two different pictures. The American Ornithological Union recognizes there is merit in both ways. We know that lambda will be used to evaluate all demography projects throughout the northwest, combining data into one final number. We know this is a very technical issue and we would like to contract our own expert to weigh-in on statistical variations in population numbers prior to the public meeting on demography.

We are concerned that the panel will be looking at population numbers on a very large scale – looking at the entire listed entity instead of assimilating information gleaned from a fine scale. We feel this is a very big problem. We encourage the panel to look at numbers on multiple scales, both large and small, rather than lumping everything together. And we encourage the panel to look at population trends as indicators of likelihood of extinction. There is simply not enough

information available to change the current protected status unless it's to list certain areas as endangered.

Interspecific Interactions –

I will talk briefly here about the barred owl issue and the West Nile Virus. First, we understand that the West Nile Virus is spreading and that it attacks NSOs but not barred owls, creating more pressure on the species.

We feel that the barred owl population has been underestimated quite a bit. The trends in barred owl populations are on the increase and have especially been in the past 5-6 years. The consequences of barred owl competition will have to be gleaned anecdotally through other studies since there is so little published research. The general feeling about barred owls is that there are substantially more of them now than spotted. Claims that spotted owl population decline is more due to barred owl competition than to habitat fragmentation from timber practices have been made. However, areas set aside for spotted owl protection are under threat now more than ever by barred owls. Barred owl competition has a negative impact on NSO populations like logging does. Because of barred owl population increases, areas set aside for timber harvest (matrix lands) are being hammered by barred owl influxes. This, and the fact that NSOs are so vulnerable to the West Nile Virus, reinforce the need to preserve all NSO habitat from logging and other types of human manipulations in order to mitigate the impacts from competition, predation, and disease.

Genetics and Taxonomy –

We are aware of the taxonomy question regarding whether there are still three subspecies designations for the spotted owl. We agree with the paper in *Evolution* (Barrowclough, et al. 1999) which concludes that there are 3 distinct subspecies of the spotted owl: Mexican, California, and northern, hence three separate management units. These subspecies have been recognized by the American Ornithological Union (AOU) since 1957. We have reviewed the paper in *Conservation Genetics* (Haig, et al. 2001) that concludes that the northern and California spotted owl are genetically mixing, creating 2 overlapping management units. We have read George Barrowclough and Rocky Gutierrez's comments on the Haig paper and agree that conclusions in the Haig paper are seriously flawed. The recent negative decision on the California spotted owl petition listing reviewed both Barrowclough and Haig and concluded: "Currently available, published genetic data (i.e., mtDNA and RAPDs) apparently lead to different conclusions regarding subspecific distinctions in spotted owls. Therefore, for the purposes of this finding, we adopt the taxonomy accepted by the American Ornithological Union (AOU 1957), which recognize the California spotted owl as distinct subspecies." We encourage the panel to do the same.

Conclusion:

This review must be science-based and impartial. All threats to the NSO must be carefully examined. Populations are on decline due to (but not limited to) loss of habitat from timber harvest practices, barred owl competition and disease, and loss of habitat from fire. Habitat loss and invasive species are the greatest threat to endangered species. There simply aren't enough surveys being conducted to paint a true picture of the status of the NSO. The magnitude of the problem cannot be revealed without site-specific surveys, nor by using out-of-date NSO population numbers from 1994 and habitat definitions from the 1980's. All of the above reasons, and others mentioned in my remarks, should indicate a need to log less, not more NSO habitat in order to allow for safe harbor of the species. If we do not set aside new core areas of critical habitat WITH recovery and dispersal plans in the very near future, we could be faced with extinction of the northern spotted owl in a matter of years.