

The Truth About NSOs

Federal “protection” is deadly to living things.

By Mike Dubrasich

Burning the Habitat

In September 2011, the U.S. Forest Service (FS) waged an aerial attack on Oregon old-growth northern spotted owl (NSO) nesting forests by firebombing them. Approximately 6,400 acres of heritage forest were destroyed by military-style incendiary bombing.

It really happened. And now firebombing old growth is established as the de facto forest policy on federal lands in Oregon and elsewhere. The chemical used by the FS to incinerate old-growth NSO habitat at Santiam Pass was potassium permanganate (KMnO₄) injected with glycerin. The explosive chemicals were encased in polyacrylate “ping-pong balls” ejected by government helicopters on green forests. An instant canopy fire resulted, an effect similar to napalm, with 100 percent mortality to plants and animals.

The Shadow Lake Fire received no initial attack. Deschutes National Forest public announcements declared that fire management strategy was “allowing nature to run its course in the wilderness.” That is a treatment prescription, but no EIS, EA, or other NEPA process was instituted. No Section-7 ESA consultations were made with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS). No Section-106 consultations were performed as required under the National Historic Preservation Act. No public process. It was an illegal firebombing.

“Let nature run its course” is not the official mission of the FS; its official mission is to “care for the land and serve the people.” However, its de facto mission has been to destroy the forests, watersheds, and economy of the West. The FS has practiced “let it burn” for years in NSO country, allowing wildfires to spread unchecked across vast tracts. Of the 24.1-million acres set aside for the NSO in 1994 in Oregon, Washington and Northern California, over seven million acres (30 percent) have been incinerated in the last 10 years alone. Let it burn has not been sufficient for their purposes, however.



Spotted owl with mouse, despite having talons too big to hold this tiny rodent. The plan to save the owls has saved no owls, no old growth, no economy, and at a cost so far of \$216 billion.

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the NSO. Dozens of catastrophic forest fires have left giant gaps in the range. The Biscuit Burn alone is 50 miles long and 20 miles wide. The NorCal fires of 2008 consumed 750,000 acres, an area half again larger than the Biscuit Burn; and (4) *To protect the regional economy.* Since inception of the NFP, rural Oregon, Washington, and Northern California have experienced 18 years of the worst economies in the United States, with some of the highest rates of unemployment, business bankruptcies, home foreclosures, and hunger.

Those are not just statistics, but indicators of real human suffering. Over 100,000 workers have lost their jobs, and the rural economy has been crippled ever since. Today 25 percent of rural Oregon families are on food stamps. In some communities as many as 80 percent of K-12 students now qualify for federal lunches based on family income. In March 2012, the unemployment rate in Siskiyou County, Calif., was 18.7 percent. All in a region rich with natural resources.

The plan to save the owls has saved nothing: not owls, not old growth, not the economy. The cost of nothing? At least \$12 billion per year times 18 years equals \$216 billion in opportunity costs for harvests foregone and their ripple effect through Pacific Northwest economies. That’s what westerners have paid, for nothing. And these bills continue to mount.

As a direct result of the NFP, federal forests in the region have accumulated biomass (fuels) in excess of 10 times historical levels. And as a direct result wildfires have raged, repeatedly spreading from unkempt, unmanaged, fuel-laden federal land to private land, and even to towns and cities, wreaking tens of billions of dollars in damages every year across the West.

Federal “protection” is deadly to living things.

Bogus Biology

The abject failure to protect the NSO, its

Now the FS deliberately firebombs our NSO forests.

Junk Policies

The 1994 Northwest Forest Plan (NFP) is a terrible mistake initiated by Bill Clinton, Al Gore, and the so-called Gang of Four at the Timber Summit in Portland, Ore., in 1993. A now-deceased federal judge gave his stamp of approval. The 1994 NFP has four fundamental goals, which it has failed spectacularly to meet: (1) *To protect NSOs.* By most estimates, the NSO population has fallen 40 to 60 percent since inception of the NFP; (2) *To protect NSO habitat.* Since inception, millions of acres of NSO habitat have been catastrophically incinerated. Millions more acres are poised to burn; (3) *To preserve habitat continuity throughout the range of*

habitat, and the economies of the Pacific Northwest is rooted in junk policies driven by the worst wildlife biology since that science was invented. In 1988, when the NSO was first listed, wildlife biologists proclaimed, "It's not about the owl; it's about the habitat!" Indeed. It has never been about the owl. It has always been about the takeover of territory by aggressive government wildlife biologists and radical environmentalists.

Unfortunately for all of us and for the owls, FWS biologists have proved to be the most incompetent and mistaken on the planet. They told us that NSOs only eat northern flying squirrels. That proved to be false; they eat all manner of rodents. They told us that NSOs do not eat mice because their "talons are too big." Yet biologists have always fed laboratory mice to the owls, which swoop down and grab the mice neatly in their massive talons. They told us that NSOs live only in old-growth forest. That proved to be false; they live in a variety of forests. They told us that NSOs nest only in hollow snags. That proved to be false. Owls nest in dwarf mistletoe brooms, tree forks, and even Kmart signs. They told us that in order to save the owl, 24 million acres must be set aside in "no touch zones." That proved to be false; the set-asides happened, but the owl population has declined by about three percent per year for 18 years—a loss of 60 percent since the landgrab was implemented. Now we are told by the FWS that an additional nine million acres must be set aside. It won't make any difference, because habitat is not the problem.

In every case, the owl biologists theorized some fanciful biological characteristic or relationship that manifestly does not exist in the real world and that violates the basic principles of wildlife biology. Charles Darwin is rolling in his grave. Recently FWS biologists have declared that barred owls are eating northern spotted owls, perpetuating another pernicious owl-biologist myth. Barred owls do not prey on NSOs. There has never been a documented case of a barred owl killing and/or eating a spotted owl. That myth was promulgated by FWS biologists as an excuse for 22 years of abject failure protecting NSOs.

The barred owl (*Strix varia*) is closely related to the spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis*) and they look virtually identical, except that barred owls have horizontal breast stripes instead of spots. They are similar in color, size, voice and wingspan, although the



Bill Hagenstein at Round Lake, Deschutes National Forest, after the 90,000-acre Biscuit Burn Fire in 2003.

barred is more varied. Both species interbreed. They make love, not war.

The FWS biologists claim that "more aggressive" barred owls are driving out spotted owls; however, there is no supporting evidence. Despite this, the latest solution proposed by the FWS is to arm federal biologists with shotguns, send them onto public and private property, and have them blast away at barred owls.

Unfortunately, NSOs and barred owls are so similar that they can't be readily distinguished by eye. DNA analysis is required to determine the species. The FWS has given no indication that its gun-toting biologists will retrieve enough blasted owl bits to make a satisfactory DNA test.

The FWS has been killing barred owls for four years in Northern California, and there are still less spotted owls. So what is really causing NSO populations to decline? Wildlife biology teaches us that population dynamics are controlled by predator-prey relations. NSOs have plenty of rodent prey. Their documented predators include eagles, hawks, falcons, and much larger owls such as great horned owls. It is likely that these have taken their toll on the spotted owl population. Ironically, the FWS has not recommended shotgun blasting of eagles, hawks, falcons, and larger owls.

Another predator is more insidious—



The aftermath of the Shadow Lake Fire, a 90,000-acre burn in a spotted owl forest in Oregon.

avian malaria. In a 2008 study published in *PLoS One*, the journal of the U.S. National Library of Medicine and National Institutes of Health ["Blood Parasites in Owls with Conservation Implications for the Spotted Owl," by Heather D. Ishak et al.], the researchers report screening 111 NSOs, 44 barred owls, and 387 owls of nine other species for blood parasites (*Leucocytozoon*, *Plasmodium*, and *Haemoproteus* spp.). NSOs had the highest incidence of avian malaria of any species tested (79 percent). Barred owl malaria incidence was 15 percent. The researchers found that NSOs had more unique lineages (haplotypes) of blood parasites than were found in any other owl species (12 unique out of 17 total lineages). Yet the 2010 Draft Revised Recovery Plan for the NSO produced by the FWS claims avian malaria is not a factor in its popula-

tion decline, a conclusion diametrically opposite to that of the epidemiological research.

The Real Solution

The federal government has denied the rights of westerners to care for our own forests, watersheds and rangelands; has imposed fees and duties on us for use of our own public lands; has erected locked gates and refused entry to the residents into our own public lands; has burned vast tracts, incinerating the wealth of the region; has destroyed our wildlife; has polluted our air and water; has fouled our streams; and has introduced exotic pests. In so doing, our homes, businesses and communities have become bankrupted, our schools, roads and public safety have been threatened, and our economy has been crippled.

The federal government first set aside our natural-resource base in a failed attempt to save NSOs. Now it firebombs those forests in acts of cynical destructiveness and malevolence beyond belief, and certainly outside the law. The best stewardship arises from local ownership and jurisdiction. We westerners know our environment, appreciate and understand our watersheds, forests, rangelands and wildlife, and wish to assume responsibility for our own environment, which is our birthright, heritage, and legacy to future generations.

In order to rectify this untenable situation, we have prepared a petition to the U.S. Congress, respectfully requesting redress of our grievances by returning ownership of our public lands to the counties of Oregon. The Petition to De-Federalize Oregon Lands, and to Return Public Land Ownership Rights to the Chartered Counties of Oregon may be found on the website of Give Us Our Land Back: <http://giveusourlandback.org>.

We cordially invite you to visit our website and sign this petition. ■

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