

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Title: Logging hurts Spotted Owls, forest fires benefit Spotted Owls

Date: 14 December 2020

Location: California, USA

DerekLee@psu.edu – 415-763-0348 (cell)

Monica@WildNatureInstitute.org – 415-323-8141 (cell)

Dominick@Wild-Heritage.org; 541-621-7223 (cell)

2020 saw record-breaking wildfires across the western United States, reigniting debate about Spotted Owls and wildfires. Federal and state authorities are pushing plans to increase logging in National Forests, ostensibly to protect Spotted Owls from wildfire, and just today the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service blamed wildfire as a major reason for population declines of Northern Spotted Owls in denying a 2012 petition by conservation groups to ‘uplist’ the owl to endangered (i.e., a “warranted but precluded” decision; [federalregister.gov/d/2020-27198](https://www.federalregister.gov/d/2020-27198)).

In a reality check of owl population declines, Dr. Derek Lee, Associate Research Professor at Pennsylvania State University, conducted a meta-analysis of all studies about wildfire effects on all 3 subspecies of Spotted Owl and found that this key indicator of the health of old-growth forests is usually not affected by wildfire. In fact, wildfire significantly increases foraging, reproduction, and recruitment for owls. Lee’s conclusions are in stark contrast to claims made by many land managers who promote logging as a way to reduce fire in Spotted Owl habitats. “The Spotted Owl was listed under the Endangered Species Act because logging has degraded or destroyed most of its old-growth forest. Logging is enemy #1 of Spotted Owls, so logging now in the name of fire reduction will only do additional harm to this declining species,” said Lee.

Lee analyzed the results from every published scientific study about the effects of wildfire on the threatened birds, summarizing his results in a [paper published in 2018](#) in the journal *Ecosphere*. In a [follow-up paper published this week](#) in *Ecosphere*, Lee responded to criticisms of his 2018 paper. After reanalyzing the data according to suggestions, he came to the same conclusions: Wildfires either have no significant effect or a significant positive effect on Spotted Owl populations, suggesting that current forest management practices promoting logging as ‘restoration’ ‘fuels reduction’ and ‘thinning’ in remote backcountry areas are misguided and will only harm the Spotted Owl and other old forest dependent species. “Evidence-based forest management would promote wildfire as a natural process that significantly improves Spotted Owl habitat and accomplishes most forest ecosystem restoration goals,” stated Lee.

“Fire creates suitable foraging habitat for Spotted Owl prey like gophers and deer mice. Spotted Owls feast on these rodents and this helps the Spotted Owl population, but only as long as the standing dead trees remain for them to perch and pounce on their prey,” said Dr. Monica Bond, a wildlife biologist who has conducted extensive research on effects of fires on Spotted Owls. “Post-fire logging and pre-fire logging are universally terrible for Spotted Owls, while fire is usually a habitat improvement.”

Dr. Dominick DellaSala, a former spotted owl recovery team member and Chief Scientist at Wild Heritage, a project of the Earth Island Institute, added “the owl was originally listed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1990 because of rampant habitat destruction and lack of protections from logging; however, the Service now wrongly casts the blame of ongoing owl declines on wildfires in failing to uphold the best available science in adequately protecting from logging a species now circling the extinction drain.”

#####