

Forest Service's land stances draw heat

Expert who worked on the agency's management plan says wildfires' effect on the spotted owl has been mischaracterized

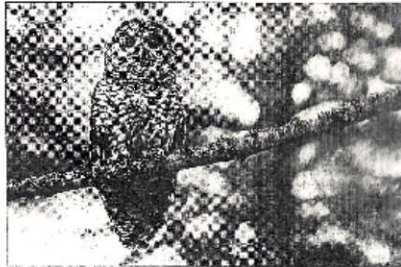
By Scott Sommer

MOSQUITO RIDGE — The Forest Service exaggerated the effect of wildfires on California spotted owls in justifying a planned increase in logging in the Sierra Nevada, according to a longtime agency expert who worked on the plan.

Other wildlife biologists inside and outside the Forest Service confirm that at least seven of 18 sites listed by the agency as owl habitat destroyed by wildfires are flourishing and occupied by the rare birds.

The new disclosures — in interviews with The Associated Press, tours of the areas in question and reviews of hundreds of pages of documents — raise new questions about the agency's conclusion in January that significantly more logging of bigger trees must be allowed than is legal under rules adopted in 2001 by the Clinton administration to protect the region's oldest forests.

The Forest Service's claim that an average of 4.5 owl sites a year have been lost to Sierra wildfires over the past four years is included in a plan to reduce wildfire threats and in a controversial agency brochure. The "Forests with a Future" brochure already is under fire from some members of Congress and others who say the agency misrepresented forest conditions in California by substituting photographs from Mor-



THE FOREST SERVICE is exaggerating wildfires' effect on spotted owls in a new plan to increase logging, wildlife biologists say.

"I'm real uncomfortable with the constant portrayal of fire in the environment as a negative thing — all hellfire and brimstone," said Michael Gertsch, a Forest Service wildlife biologist since 1976. Gertsch said he was removed last year from the team that wrote the plan to manage the 11 national forests in the Sierra Nevada after he complained repeatedly about the agency's mischaracterization of the effect fires have on the owl, which is dependent on old stands of trees.

An important statement that put fire threats in perspective was stricken from the final version of the plan published in January, Gertsch told The Associated Press.

"It was dropped because the conclusion of my analysis was that fire appears to be more of a maintenance mechanism than a destructive force for owl habitat," said Gertsch, who works as the agency's Pacific Southwest regional coordinator of threatened

and endangered species.

"The only reason the revisions were made was to allow logging of bigger trees," said Chad Hanson, director of the John Muir Project, which is appealing the plan to Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth. "It was a gift to the timber industry."

Forest Service regional spokesman Matt Mathes said any discrepancies between the data used to calculate effects on owls and forest conditions are due to outdated figures "and not an intentional attempt to mislead."

"We went with what we knew at the time. They were lost at the time the draft went out. Things change on the ground," Mathes said.

An AP tour of two owl habitat sites reported destroyed by fire according to the Forest Service showed mostly green forests. In the worst case, about one-third of the forest area had burned, Forest

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Inspection reveals little of reported damage in birds' 'activity centers'

By Scott Sommer

MOSQUITO RIDGE — A wildlife biologist who once surveyed California spotted owls for the Forest Service told the agency last fall there was no basis for flash claims there are losing the birds of prey to Sierra wildfires.

Monica Bond, who now works for the Center for Biological Diversity, which is challenging federal logging plans in the region, and Chad Hanson, director of the John Muir Project, argue the agency has dramatically overstated fire damage to owl sites — typically 300- to 400-acre areas around nests called Protected Activity Centers, or PACs.

To make their case, they have walked and photographed six of the sites the Forest Service claims have been "lost" to wildfires.

"We still have yet to see an owl PAC where the majority of it was burned. The majority of it is all green and beautiful," Hanson said.

In one case, the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco granted a temporary injunction halting a salvage logging operation based in part on hundreds of photographs Hanson's group submitted to show the site was mostly alive, contrary to the agency's claims.

Bond said she was "flabbergasted" when she returned to a "lost" site at the Eldorado National Forest where the Forest Service said 289 acres of the 300-acre PAC burned.

The Forest Service said 18 owl sites have been lost, but Bond es-

timated the vast majority of the PAC could still support owls.

An AP reporter and photographer accompanied Bond and Hanson on recent trips to other owl sites in the Lassen National Forest, northwest of Eureka and in the Tahoe National Forest near Truck Meadows Reservoir west of Lake Tahoe.

Three Forest Service officials joined the tour of the Tahoe site on Mosquito Ridge 30 miles northeast of Foresthill. The agency's environmental impact statement says that PAC was "lost" in the Red Star fire of 2001. It says 286 acres of the 318-acre PAC is now unsuitable habitat — about 85 percent.

But as much of three-fourths of the site appears to be flourishing. And Karen Hayden, biologist for the Tahoe National Forest, agreed less than half of the PAC is unsuitable.

"They didn't get that from us," Hayden said. "The majority of the habitat in the PAC is suitable. ... It hasn't been lost. It's still here."

In fact, Hayden said, Matt Triggs, biologist for the Tahoe's Foresthill ranger district, said the statement is wrong to list any of the three Tahoe PACs as lost. They said the same is true for at least one of two PACs on the neighboring Eldorado National Forest.

"The list, it's a little puzzling," said Rich Johnson, the agency's Foresthill district ranger. "It may be semantics. It could be based on modeling or based on an outdated database."

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Service biologists confirmed one of the sites remained inhabited by spotted owls and acknowledged the other could support the birds.

The same seems true across much of the Sierra, according to agency experts and others.

A wildlife biologist who surveyed owl sites for the Forest Service near Lake Tahoe from 1999-2001 said her visits to six of 18 Sierra sites the agency lists as "lost" to fire since 1960 has found mostly green stands capable of supporting the owls, including several occupied by the birds.

Two Forest Service biologists in the field confirmed all three sites labeled "lost" in the Tahoe National Forest are occupied by owls. The agency's regional office apparently mischaracterized the situation based on outdated or outdated data, they said.

A third said the same is true of an owl site in the Eldorado National Forest west of Lake Tahoe.

and a fourth said the same thing about at least three owl sites listed as "lost" at the Plumas National Forest 50 miles northwest of Reno.

"They are not lost. We had owl surveys conducted after the burn and were able to put owls at each one," said Gary Rotta, a biologist for the Plumas National Forest's 161,000-acre district.

Mathes acknowledged owls may inhabit some of the sites — which are typically 300 to 400 acres — but he insisted that won't last for long.

Sometimes they remain "among black stems for as long as two years after a wildfire goes through. But eventually the owls do leave," Mathes said.

"You and I could live in a cardboard box on the sidewalk for a certain amount of time. But not for long, and you almost certainly wouldn't create offspring."

Critics said the agency is intentionally exaggerating the fire impacts to build a case for more logging.

"It's a really twisted argument," said Myrica Bond, the biologist who surveyed owls for the

Forest Service at the Eldorado and Tahoe national forests and now works for the Center for Biological Diversity, another non-profit conservation group appealing the plan.

"They are using concerns over the owl and concerns about loss of habitat as justification to do more logging of the habitat," she said.

"The claims that fire is eliminating spotted owl habitat in the Sierra Nevada does not appear to be based on any surveys or site-specific analysis of owl survival and occupancy."

The Forest Service first cited a decline in spotted owl nests due to fires in 2003 when agency officials under the Bush administration announced plans to revamp the Clinton-era forest strategy.

Nearly a decade in the making, the Clinton plan had made most all of the Sierra's remaining old-growth forests off limits to logging.

But the agency said that policy no longer was workable because of increased fire dangers and revised it to allow for up to a

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tripling of logging levels to thin the overly dense stands and protect communities and wildlife.

Jack Blackwell, the Forest Service's regional boss in charge of the new plan, cited the loss of owl habitat in issuing the amended version Jan. 22. It's currently before Bosworth, who is considering a number of administrative appeals filed by environmentalists.

"Large, old trees, wildlife habitat, homes and local communities will be increasingly destroyed unless the plan is improved," Blackwell said, specifically citing the recent loss of owl habitat.

Timber industry leaders and their allies in Congress cheered the move.

"The Forest Service is taking steps to reform the outdated management policies left in place by the Clinton administration," said Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Tracy, chairman of the House Resources Committee.

"The plan recognizes fire is the single greatest threat to communities, endangered species like the California spotted owl and the overall health of the forests," he

said.

The California Forestry Association, though still critical of some parts, agreed the changes "would protect the largest amount of wildlife habitat from current wildfire threats."

Bosworth is to rule before the end of the year on the administrative challenges. He will consider the critics' claims but "there's no way to know at this stage" whether the owl discrepancies could be considered significant enough to force another rewrite of the plan, his chief spokesman Dan Jiran said from Washington, D.C.

Gertsch said the new plan was a flawed process in comparison to when he helped write the Clinton forest rules, called the "Sierra Nevada Framework."

"We involved all the communities," said Gertsch, but that didn't happen with the most recent rewrite, he said.

"Snippets were taken from science, but they didn't listen to the science community. That's why there has been so much criticism," Gertsch said.

"I fought and fought, and

fought and fought and finally they used some excuse and removed me from the team," he said.

Mathes said he cannot discuss "personnel issues or transfers." Agency documents frequently are revised between draft and final stages, he said.

"We are like any other large organization. We have a diversity of professional opinion," Mathes said.

Gertsch remains a supporter of traditional efforts to thin forests to reduce fire threats but is critical of a series of color brochures printed for the Forest Service's "Forests for the Future" campaign, which presents accelerated logging as the key to protecting spotted owls and other wildlife.

"The flier is totally bogus," Gertsch said.

The fire danger could have been addressed under the original framework without easing old-growth protection, he said.

"It would have taken a greater amount of time and cost significantly more. The urgency to get it done kind of overruled the environmental concerns in some cases."