Appendix G
Forests

Service biologists confirmed one of the most remarkable findings in this area: a forest fire burned and skeletonized the majority of the trees in the Sierra National Forest. This fire destroyed nearly all the trees in the area, leaving the landscape a charred wasteland. The fire also burned and skeletonized the majority of the trees in the Sierra Nevada.
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Seven sites listed as destroyed by wildfire are flourishing and have spotted owls.

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 green, flourishing and occupied by the rare birds of prey.
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 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 Montana.

"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 the forest area had burned. Forest 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 1999 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 mistaken 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, Nev.

"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 Mount Hough 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 Monica 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 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 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-Calif., 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.

Gertsch said the new plan was a flawed process in comparison to Clinton administration forest rules he helped write and which were adopted in the closing days of the administration.

"Snippets were taken from science, but they didn't listen to the science community," Gertsch said. Communities also were not involved in the process, he 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."

Jerry Franklin, a University of Washington forester who played a lead role in developing plans to protect the northern spotted owl in the 1990s, is among the prominent scientists who has spoken out against the changes.

"I believe it is a major step back from the ecologically sound approach that had been adopted," Franklin said.

"These large trees of fire resistant species are needed for both fire resiliency and as habitat," he said.

Regardless of criticism and discrepancies in the plan, the agency stands behind its conclusion that more logging is needed to protect the owls.

"Whether or not there is a mix-up or a simple error, our thought process in reaching the decision was not based only on what has happened but what will happen in the future," Mathes said.

"Fires are getting bigger and hotter," he said. Owl habitat has been destroyed and "we expect that trend to continue in the future, perhaps even accelerate, if we don't take some action to change the density of the forest."

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On the Net:

U.S. Forest Service: http://www.fs.fed.us/r5/

John Muir Project: www.johnmuirproject.org

Center for Biological Diversity: http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/swcbd/

California Forestry Association: http://www.foresthealth.org/

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