

sometimes referred to as nesting, roosting, and foraging (NRF) habitat.

"Take" means to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect, or to attempt to engage in any such conduct with respect to a spotted owl.

"Threatened Species" means a plant or wildlife species defined through the Endangered Species Act that is likely to become within the foreseeable future an endangered species throughout all or a significant portion of its range.

"Timber harvest and related activity" means any activity that would result in the removal or degradation of suitable habitat.

## Background

### *Regulatory History of the Northern Spotted Owl*

The Service listed the northern spotted owl as a threatened species on June 26, 1990, because of the past and continued projected loss of suitable habitat throughout its range (55 FR 26114). This habitat loss has been caused primarily by timber harvesting, but has been exacerbated by the effects of catastrophic events such as fire, volcanic eruption, and wind storms.

The inadequacy of regulatory mechanisms existing in 1990 under State and Federal law also contributed to the decision to list the northern spotted owl as a threatened species. During the period immediately prior to listing, when the status of the owl was under review, the annual Federal timber harvest in Oregon and Washington averaged approximately 5 billion board feet per year. Much of that harvest comprised suitable spotted owl habitat. Thus, Federal timber harvest policies at that time contributed significantly to the decline of the owl.

State protection for the owl in 1990 was also inadequate. Since that time, California, Oregon and Washington have all recognized the plight of the owl and have adopted forest management rules designed to protect this threatened species. The degree of protection accorded the northern spotted owl currently varies under State law. The northern spotted owl is listed under Washington law as an endangered species, under Oregon law as threatened, and under California law as a sensitive species.

On January 15, 1992, the Service designated critical habitat for the northern spotted owl (57 FR 1796). The critical habitat designation encompassed 6.9 million acres of Federal land in 190 critical habitat units in the States of California, Oregon, and Washington; non-Federal lands were not

included in the critical habitat designation. Of the total acreage that was designated, 20 percent is in California, 47 percent is in Oregon, and 32 percent is in Washington.

Following the April 2, 1993, Forest Conference in Portland, Oregon, President Clinton established a Forest Ecosystem Management Assessment Team (FEMAT) to develop options for the management of Federal LSOG-forest ecosystems to provide habitat that would support stable populations of species associated with late-successional forests, including the northern spotted owl. FEMAT developed ten options for the management of LSOG-forest ecosystems on Federal lands in California, Oregon, and Washington, which are outlined in the Team's report, "Forest Ecosystem Management: An Ecological, Economic, and Social Assessment" (USDA et al. 1993). On July 1, 1993, the President identified Option 9 as the preferred alternative for amending the Federal agencies' land management plans with respect to LSOG forest habitat. A modified version of Option 9 was adopted in the April 13, 1994, Record of Decision for Amendments to Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management Planning Documents Within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl (ROD). It is based on a system of late-successional reserves, riparian reserves, adaptive management areas, and a matrix of Federal lands interspersed with non-Federal lands. These designations complemented existing Administratively withdrawn and Congressionally reserved lands.

The adoption of the Forest Plan was subsequently upheld in Federal court. On December 21, 1994, Federal District Court Judge William L. Dwyer rejected plaintiffs' challenges and issued an order upholding the President's Forest Plan.

An underlying premise for the President's selection of the Forest Plan was that Federal lands should carry a disproportionately heavier burden for providing for the conservation of the northern spotted owl, enabling an easing of restrictions on incidental take for the owl on large areas of non-Federal lands. President Clinton thus directed the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to issue regulations pursuant to section 4(d) of the Act looking to ease, where appropriate, restrictions on the incidental take of spotted owls on non-Federal lands.

On December 29, 1993, the Service published in the **Federal Register** a Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement in support of a 4(d) rule for the spotted owl

(58 FR 69132). The NOI spelled out various alternative approaches for a 4(d) rule, including a preferred approach or proposed action. This provided a preliminary opportunity for public input prior to the actual publication of this proposed rule.

### *Summary of Public Comments on Scoping Notice on 4(d) Rule*

The Service received more than 8,500 comments from the public on its scoping notice for a section 4(d) rule EIS for the spotted owl. Most comments received were in response to a January 3, 1994, special mailer sent by the Service to approximately 80,000 recipients. The Service specifically asked for suggestions on issues to be addressed in the 4(d) rule. In general, the comments reinforced issues and concerns identified in previous planning efforts for the spotted owl.

In the scoping notice, the Service sought comments on ten specific issues. The comments received are summarized below, by issue:

(1) Biological, commercial, trade, or other relevant data on the distribution and abundance of the northern spotted owl on non-Federal lands in California, Washington and Oregon.

No new data or information was provided to the Service relative to this issue.

(2) Biological, commercial, trade or other relevant data on the distribution and abundance of the northern spotted owl that identifies the effects of the alternatives for a section 4(d) rule on the northern spotted owl.

No new data or information was provided to the Service relative to this issue.

(3) The scope of the issues that have been identified for the environmental impact statement on a proposed special rule.

In addition to the issues identified in the scoping notice, commenters identified several additional issues for the Service to consider. Several commenters objected to any provision requiring that 40 percent of suitable habitat be retained within the median annual home range circle of an owl located within SEAs, and, because it means that 60 percent of suitable habitat within a home range may be lost, requested an explanation of the biological basis for such a provision. They also requested that the Service consider how habitat modification on non-Federal land will affect owls on adjacent Federal lands.

Comments from non-Federal landowners requested that the Service consider the possible economic benefits of a variety of silvicultural regulations