

New understanding protects endangered owls

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New Mexico, Arizona planning forest thinning projects

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz.— A new understanding was reached the week of July 6 that will ensure that forest thinning projects in six national forests in Arizona and New Mexico will better protect endangered Mexican spotted owls.

The understanding was reached between the Center for Biological Diversity, the U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the states of New Mexico and Arizona and the Eastern Arizona Counties Organization.

“This landmark understanding provides better protection for this beautiful endangered bird and the rare, large tree-dominated, upper-elevation habitat that the owls need to survive,” Robin Silver, a cofounder of the Center said. “It’s a wonderful example of conservation, forestry and government entities working together to save wildlife and keep our forests healthy.”

The Forest Service has agreed that all projects involving Mexican spotted owls will be presented to the public in a standardized format. The format will be developed by the partners and will include, for example, current forest data, clear presentations of the number of large trees and canopy that will be affected by the proposed project, and detailed post-treatment

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modeling and monitoring. Projects currently pending will incorporate these changes and will be included in a new regional habitat monitoring program.

Pending projects include the South Sacramento Restoration Project in the Sacramento Mountains on the Lincoln National Forest, the Black River Restoration Project in the White Mountains, the Four Forests Restoration Initiative Rim Country Project on the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest and the Santa Fe Mountains Resiliency Project on the Santa Fe National Forest. In addition, the Hassayampa Landscape Restoration Project in the Bradshaw Mountains on the Prescott National Forest will be revised to include these changes.

“This new understanding represents our commitment to conducting sustainable restoration projects in a way that benefits all,” Elaine Kohrman, deputy regional forester for the Southwestern Region of the Forest Service said. “All parties are working towards similar ends, and through this collaborative effort we will all see better outcomes for forest health, wildlife conservation including the Mexican spotted owl, and local communities.”

“Restoration and biodiversity partners have wrestled since the 1980s with how to merge the forest and watershed restoration focus and the Mexican spotted owl recovery focus. This has not always been an easy issue,” Pascal Berlioux, executive director of the Eastern Arizona Counties Organization, said. “This new work to protect endangered owls while mitigating catastrophic landscape-scale fire risk is critical to the future of the Southwest forests and their communities, and this new understanding and the massive work and commitments from all parties to reach it, are a very encouraging sign that we can collectively succeed in protecting both rare habitat and endangered species.”

“This understanding also benefits forest workers and rural communities where residents will soon be gathering firewood for the next winter,” Laura McCarthy, New Mexico state forester, said.

“We are pleased to be a small part of a collaborative solution that protects the Mexican spotted owl and its habitat, while allowing for an increase in the pace and scale of forest restoration treatments in Arizona,” Arizona State Forester David Tenney said.

In April, the Center filed a formal notice of intent to sue the Forest Service and Fish and Wildlife

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Service over concerns that 13 forest-restoration projects in Arizona and New Mexico failed to provide adequate protection for endangered Mexican spotted owls. Several months of negotiations led to this understanding.

In March 2013, WildEarth Guardians sued the Forest Service for failing to implement required region-wide spotted owl habitat monitoring. In September 2019, the lawsuit stopped logging projects in New Mexico on the Carson, Cibola, Gila, Lincoln and Santa Fe national forests and in Arizona on the Tonto National Forest. WildEarth Guardians and the Forest Service have tentatively agreed to settle that lawsuit.

The Center launched its lawsuit over concerns that the Forest Service would not provide enough protection for the rare, upper-elevation forest habitat that the owls require. The owls' habitat represents about six percent of the approximate 900,000 forest-restoration project area acres undergoing treatments across the Southwest. The Center did not challenge fire prevention and forest restoration in the rest of the projects' forested areas. Under this understanding, the Center will not pursue litigation in this case.

The cooperative effort has provided an opportunity for the Center and others to provide measures to the Forest Service that can better provide protections and enhancements for Mexican spotted owl populations and habitats in the long term.