

Statement for the Record
U.S. Department of the Interior
Before the
House Natural Resources Subcommittee on
National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
Oversight Field Hearing: “Failed Federal Forest Policies: Endangering Jobs,
Forests and Species”

May 21, 2012

Introduction

The Department of the Interior (Department) takes this opportunity to submit a Statement for the Record on Federal forest policies and their effects on local economies and natural resources. Because the oversight hearing is being held in the state of Washington, our statement addresses the Department’s policies for public forests and natural resources in the Pacific Northwest, as well as the economic contributions in the states of Washington and Oregon from the Department’s forest management activities.

Background

The public lands and natural resources managed by the Department of the Interior play an important role in American lives, economies, and communities, and include some of our Nation’s greatest assets. The forests of the Pacific Northwest have provided, for more than a century, the timber which Americans have used to build countless homes, schools, and factories. The rivers traversing these forests create hydropower that has supplied electricity to generations of Americans. Within the public lands today are also preserved the last areas of old-growth forest that link the current generation of Americans back through millennia.

The mission of the Department is to protect and manage the responsible use of many of America’s most significant natural resources. Within the Department, both the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) play a role in the public forests in the Pacific Northwest. The FWS carries out its mission of working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The BLM, meanwhile, is responsible for managing 245 million surface acres of public lands in 11 western states. Of these lands, the BLM manages 2.2 million acres of commercial forest in western Oregon and California (O&C), which is allocated for a variety of multiple uses, including conservation of northern spotted owl and riparian habitat as well as for traditional forest products such as lumber, plywood, and paper.

In December 2010, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar hosted a Forest Summit in Washington, D.C. Dozens of stakeholders voiced familiar concerns and desires: conserve old-growth, recover threatened species; sustain local communities; provide jobs, and reduce wildfire risk. The Secretary renewed the Department’s commitment to a strong working partnership with open lines of communication in order to tackle the long-standing challenges of achieving these complex goals.

This Administration's policies reject the false choice between the environment and our communities. Rather, the Department has embraced a multiple-use concept that supports traditional jobs in the forestry industries by providing for sustainable timber harvest while restoring ecosystems for environmental benefits and recreation. We are committed to continuing our work with stakeholders and interested members of the public to find ways to balance the economic potential of the Pacific Northwest forests with protecting watersheds and providing habitat for endangered species.

Forest Management

Under the Oregon and California (O&C) Grant Lands Act of 1937 (43 U.S.C. § 1181a), the BLM administers its 2.2 million-acre O&C forests *“in conformity with the principle of sustained yield for the purpose of providing a permanent source of timber supply, protecting watersheds, regulating stream flow, and contributing to the economic stability of local communities and industries, and providing recreational facilities”*.

For the better part of the past 17 years, the BLM's management of the O&C lands has been framed by the Northwest Forest Plan and the BLM's 1995 Western Oregon Resource Management Plans (RMPs). In managing timber activities on public forestlands, the BLM's objectives are to:

- Provide timber-based economic opportunities for rural communities;
- Ensure the long-term health and productivity of these lands; and
- In coordination with the FWS and other agencies and partners, create multiple environmental benefits – including recovery and conservation of species and habitat – that result from healthy forests and watersheds.

Economic Activity / Timber Sales

The BLM's timber management activities have direct effects in terms of employment and income in the Pacific Northwest, as well as induced effects in the local economy, such as the activities of other businesses required to support timber operations. In Oregon, which has seen a marked decline in traditional forestry jobs, BLM's forest management activities supported over 2,700 jobs in 2010 and produced almost \$600 million in economic activity (*The Department of the Interior's Economic Contributions; June 21, 2011*).

Although timber purchases as well as harvest levels are driven by market forces, the BLM continues to offer a predictable, sustainable supply of timber sales in western Oregon of approximately 200 million board feet (MMBF) per year. In recent years the BLM's timber volumes offered for sale have ranged from highs of 236 MMBF in 2008 and 233 MMBF in 2010, to 198 MMBF in 2007.

The BLM offered 198 million board feet of timber for sale in FY2011, including 28 MMBF from the Roseburg District and 22 MMBF from the Medford District, and in addition, re-offered 12 million board feet from previous contracts that had been mutually cancelled. In FY 2012, the

BLM plans to offer the program target volume of 193 MMBF of timber for sale; the Roseburg target is 28 MMBF and the Medford target is 19 MMBF. The BLM also plans to reoffer additional volume from eight more contracts that were mutually cancelled. For FY 2013, the BLM budget proposal also includes an increase of \$1.5 million in the O&C Forest Management program to increase the volume of timber offered for sale.

Forest Health & Productivity

The Department's highest priority activities are directed toward reducing risks to communities by ensuring the long-term health of these forests and their watersheds. In recent decades, prolonged droughts and the spread of insect infestation have devastated millions of acres of trees in the Northwest. Through Federal forestry management, we are working to improve the health of these forest ecosystems, which, in turn, makes the forested lands more resilient against the risk of wildfires and invasive species, and preserves key wildlife habitat that will aid in conserving and recovering threatened and endangered species.

The BLM, in collaboration with the FWS, is working to refine its implementation of active management, which employs science-based "ecological forestry" practices that are carefully tailored to restore localized forest areas to healthy conditions. In the dry forests of southwestern Oregon, for example, a prescription for active management may require intervention to reduce the buildup of fuels. In the wetter forests on the west side of the Cascades, a prescription may include patchy regeneration harvests in addition to thinning to better mimic natural forest processes. In addition to restoring forest health, these techniques allow for sustainable timber harvests for local mills and the communities who rely on the timber industry for jobs and economic strength.

Pilot Projects

As a result of the December 2010 Forest Summit, Secretary Salazar set in motion a plan to apply the principles of active forest management, as suggested by Professors Norm Johnson and Jerry Franklin, on BLM lands within the Coos Bay, Roseburg, and Medford Districts in Oregon. Professors Johnson and Franklin – in collaboration with the BLM, FWS, the National Marine Fisheries Service, and the Coquille Indian Tribe -- are demonstrating the ecological and economic merits of ecological forestry principles in Oregon's moist and dry forests. The Medford pilot project, the first of the three sales and the one furthest along in implementation, received no protests or administrative appeals and sold for more than four times the appraised value. Commercial harvest is underway in that Pilot. The Coos Bay and Roseburg Pilots are at various stages of the sale and environmental assessment process.

Based on the promise of these pilot projects described by Professors Johnson and Franklin in a report on Ecological Forestry pilot projects, in February Secretary Salazar announced that the BLM will plan five additional timber sales using ecological forestry principles in 2012 and 2013. Drs. Johnson and Franklin estimate that the BLM's use of ecological forestry practices would sustainably yield an annual harvest of approximately 217 to 286 MMBF for the next 15 years from the public forests in Oregon.

Moving Forward / Planning

As part of the commitment to restoring healthy habitat and providing sustainable timber harvest and revenues – in March of 2012, BLM announced that it will undertake Resource Management Plan (RMP) revisions which will provide goals, objectives, and direction for the management of approximately 2,500,000 acres of BLM-administered lands in western Oregon. The revisions to the existing RMPs will determine how the BLM will actively manage BLM-administered forests in western Oregon for multiple objectives including contributing to the recovery of threatened and endangered species, to provide clean water, to restore fire adapted ecosystems, to produce a sustained yield of timber products, and provide for recreation opportunities. Finding a balanced, sustainable approach is critical in western Oregon. The Department encourages citizens to participate in discussions about management of public forests in western Oregon and to be part of the solution. The first step in the BLM’s process to revise RMPs is a formal public scoping period to seek public input regarding the range of issues to be addressed in the planning process, including the management alternatives that should be examined. The public scoping period ends on July 5, 2012.

We expect that with participation from members of the public and stakeholders in this scoping process as well as throughout the planning process, the agency will be better able to determine which forest management practices and activities will help achieve our goals.

Northern Spotted Owl Recovery Efforts

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is working to recover the northern spotted owl in coordination with the U.S. Forest Service, BLM, National Park Service, and many other state, tribal, and private sector partners. Recovery efforts currently encompass recovery planning, critical habitat designation, and barred owl management. The recently released 2011 Recovery Plan for the Northern Spotted Owl includes 34 recovery actions and makes three overarching recommendations: 1) protect the best of the spotted owl’s remaining habitat; 2) conserve forest ecosystems through active management; and 3) reduce competition from the encroaching barred owl. Specifically:

- To protect the best of the spotted owl’s remaining habitat, FWS recommends conserving spotted owl sites and high quality habitat across the landscape. This means the habitat protections provided under land use plans on Federal lands will continue to be a focus of recovery, but protection of other areas is likely needed to achieve full success. FWS is currently seeking public comment on the proposed critical habitat designation and an economic analysis will be made available for public review and comment.
- To conserve forest ecosystems through active management, FWS recommends actions that make forest ecosystems healthier and more resilient to the effects of climate change and catastrophic wildfire, disease, and insect outbreaks. This involves an “ecological forestry” approach in certain areas, which may include carefully applied prescriptions such as fuels treatment to reduce the threat of severe fires, thinning to help older trees grow faster, and restoration to enhance habitat and return the natural dynamics of a healthy forest landscape.

FWS also recommends continually evaluating and refining active forest management techniques. This effort includes the BLM's pilot projects, supported by Secretary Salazar.

- To reduce competition from the encroaching barred owl, FWS recommends managing barred owl populations to give the spotted owl a chance to rebound sufficiently that the two species may eventually be able to co-exist. To test the feasibility and effectiveness of barred owl management, the FWS is proposing experimental removal of barred owls in certain portions of the spotted owl's range to see how this may affect spotted owls. If the experiment proceeds and the effects on spotted owls are positive, the FWS may consider the efficacy and feasibility of barred owl removal on a broader scale.

Northern Spotted Owl Recovery Plan and Critical Habitat Proposal Minimizes Impact to Private Landowners and States

The 2011 Recovery Plan for the Northern Spotted Owl acknowledges that certain areas on non-Federal lands play a critical role in recovery and recommends working collaboratively with key conservation partners such as state agencies, private landowners, and tribes. FWS is pursuing ongoing dialogue and collaborative decision-making with state agency partners and citizens to determine the best way forward. FWS will also continue to consult and collaborate with tribal governments that have long worked to monitor and conserve spotted owls on their lands, thus making valuable contributions to recovery. The goal is to work with partners and citizens to evaluate the potential contribution of state and private lands to recovery in areas where Federal lands are limited. If any areas are to be included, FWS will work together to develop economic and other sensible incentives for voluntary habitat conservation partnerships such as Safe Harbor agreements and Habitat Conservation Plans.

For the current critical habitat proposal, FWS is considering the exclusion of several categories of land from the final designation, including state and private lands which are already managed for conservation. When a critical habitat designation includes non-Federal lands with no Federal connection, there is no direct effect on landowners (though there may be indirect effects). The designation helps to inform state and local government agencies and private landowners about the value of the habitat. As a result, a critical habitat designation may help facilitate voluntary conservation partnerships such as Safe Harbor agreements and Habitat Conservation Plans.

A Safe Harbor is a voluntary agreement between FWS and a private landowner that encourages private landowners to carry out habitat conservation measures on their land to benefit species listed under the Endangered Species Act. In exchange, FWS provides assurances that future land use restrictions will not be imposed. Under Safe Harbors, some impacts to individual species may occur in return for the landowner's commitment to conservation measures that contribute to the species' population overall. This provides landowners with more certainty for their land use planning. There are currently five Safe Harbor agreements for the northern spotted owl—two in Washington, one providing statewide coverage in Oregon, and two in northern California.

Similarly, Habitat Conservation Plans are used for non-Federal landowners (usually government agencies, private organizations, or businesses) whose otherwise lawful activities are expected to impact listed species. The FWS works with these landowners to develop provisions for

monitoring, minimizing, and mitigating for potential incidental take. There are currently 12 Habitat Conservation Plans for the spotted owl—six in Washington covering more than 2 million acres, two in Oregon covering 200,000 acres, and four in California covering more than 200,000 acres.

Addressing Forestry Needs

The BLM has a target of 197 million board feet of proposed sales in western Oregon in FY 2013. The Secretary announced that as part of this target, BLM will plan for at least five additional timber sales (totaling approximately 15 million board feet) using ecological forestry principles. By using ecological forestry principles, addressing the growing impact of the invasive barred owl and expanding the scientific foundation for wise management of our forests, the Department of the Interior seeks to give communities, foresters, and land managers the additional tools they need to forge healthier and more resilient forests. The Department is also working closely with the Forest Service, which recently announced steps to improve forest restoration through active management and to increase forest products sold by the National Forests from 2.4 billion board feet in 2011 to 3 billion board feet no later than 2014.

The current critical habitat proposal for northern spotted owl encourages increasing active management of forests, consistent with ecological forestry principles and practices within critical habitat when it promotes forest restoration and ecosystem health. This is a major change from previous critical habitat designations. Many Pacific Northwest forests are out of balance due to an interaction of natural and human influences. In the drier and diseased forests, FWS supports intervention to protect older trees, reduce unnatural fire risk, and better manage insect outbreaks. In the moist forests west of the Cascade Mountains, FWS supports thinning and patchy regeneration harvests that better mimic natural forest processes. Application of such science-based forest treatments could provide significant economic and employment opportunities in many areas and should be compatible with the goals of northern spotted owl recovery. It may also reduce the potential for litigation of some timber harvest proposals that apply these methods.

The Endangered Species Act requires the FWS to identify all areas essential to the conservation of a species and that may require special management, and then to take other factors, such as economic impacts, into consideration to refine proposals before critical habitat designations are finalized. The critical habitat proposal that identifies areas that may be considered for the final designation also emphasizes the significant benefits of excluding private lands, and that consideration, along with the economic assessment, will help inform which areas will be excluded from the final critical habitat designation. The FWS is contracting with economics experts to develop a thorough economic analysis of the critical habitat proposal, which will evaluate timber harvest-related and other potential economic impacts. The economic analysis will be made available for public review and comment, prior to the finalization of the northern spotted owl critical habitat designation.

Conclusion

By working in partnership with local communities, forest industry, and conservation groups, this Administration is moving toward a long-term strategy for forest management that is

environmentally sound and economically sustainable. The Department's science-based planning activities, informed by economic analysis and public feedback, will provide greater certainty for timber mills and communities while conserving our land, water and wildlife.

#