



Developing Effective Fuels Treatments for Mexican Spotted Owl Habitat

FY 2009 President's Budget

ISSUES

Forests in much of the Western U.S. are dominated by overstocked stands resulting from years of fire suppression. The risk of catastrophic fire is unacceptably high in these stands, particularly near the wildland-urban interface. Forest thinning is urgently needed to protect private lands and other resource values in these areas. However, information on the effects of forest thinning on threatened and endangered wildlife species and their habitat is limited. This uncertainty can hamper the ability of managers to accomplish the necessary thinning.

IMPORTANCE

The need for action in these forests is pressing. At the same time, legal and societal mandates to protect habitats for species at risk must be respected. Thus, information is needed that will allow managers to balance reduction of fire risk with protection of special habitat features for native wildlife. This is one of the major challenges facing land managers throughout the western U.S.

FUTURE PLANS

There is general consensus among a broad coalition of interest groups on the need to reduce fuels in western forests. There is less agreement on how best to accomplish this, particularly in areas occupied by threatened or endangered species. Some of these species, such as the Mexican spotted owl, favor older forests featuring closed canopies, multiple tree layers, and flammable features such as trees and logs. Rocky Mountain Research Station (RMRS) scientists propose to work with fuels managers to



develop and test fuels-reduction treatments that will allow managers to reduce fire risk to acceptable levels while maintaining sufficient special habitat components to support persistent populations of Mexican spotted owls and their prey. By approaching this issue proactively, we hope to provide managers with prescriptions that will satisfy legal and societal mandates for species and habitat protection, while simultaneously allowing for effective reduction of fire risk.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- Improved understanding of ecological responses of spotted owls and their prey to forest thinning.
- Development of mitigation strategies allowing thinning of forests occupied by Mexican spotted owls while protecting owl habitat.
- Improved ability to conduct thinning in forests occupied by Mexican spotted owls, unhampered by legal challenges, litigation, or appeals.
- Improved ability to manage fuels in older, closed-canopy forests in the face of changing climates.