



News Release

Southwest Region

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Mexican Spotted Owl Critical Habitat Finalized

Following a court order, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today designated 4.6 million acres on Federal lands in four southwestern states as critical habitat for the endangered Mexican spotted owl. The designation includes 830,000 acres in Arizona, 525,000 acres in Colorado, 54,000 acres in New Mexico, and 3.2 million acres in Utah. No private, state, or tribal lands are included in the designation.

Critical habitat refers to specific geographic areas that are essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and that may require special management considerations. A critical habitat designation does not set up a preserve or refuge and only applies to situations where Federal funding, authorization or permits are involved. Since no private, state or tribal lands are being designated, today's decision will only affect activities on Federal lands.

The acreage was altered from the draft proposal released July 21, 2000, which originally identified 13.5 million acres across the four states. Much of the decrease came from excluding Federal lands under the jurisdiction of agencies that have formally agreed to conservation measures that protect the owl. Agencies without formal agreements will continue to protect the owl and its habitat by using a consultation process provided for in the Endangered Species Act.

The Service expects the effect of the designation on Federal agencies will be limited. Under another provision of the Act, Federal agencies already consult with the Service on the effects their projects may have on the Mexican spotted owl.

Based on previous consultations with Federal agencies, the Service does not expect the designation of critical habitat to affect activities such as thinning trees less than 9 inches in diameter; fuels reduction to reduce the risk of wildfire; "personal use" commodity production such as fuel wood, latillas and vigas, and Christmas tree cutting; livestock grazing in upland habitats; and most recreation activities including hiking, camping, fishing, hunting, cross-country skiing, off-road vehicle use, and various wildlife observation activities.

(More)

While the Service is designating 4.6 million acres of critical habitat for the Mexican spotted owl, not all the areas within the mapped-boundaries have habitat elements important to the owl. The Service will require consultations only on the activities that affect those areas that contain the physical and biological features necessary for the species' survival. Private inholdings may appear in the mapped areas but are not included in the designation.

Portions of several counties within each state contain critical habitat units. In Arizona, the counties are Apache, Cochise, Coconino, Graham, Mohave and Pima. Counties in Colorado include Custer, Douglas, El Paso, Fremont, Huerfano, Jefferson, Pueblo, and Teller. In New Mexico, the counties are McKinley, Rio Arriba, Sandoval, Socorro and Taos while Utah counties include Carbon, Emery, Garfield, Grand, Iron, Kane, Washington, and Wayne.

Federal agencies overseeing these lands include the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, Department of Defense, and Bureau of Reclamation.

Earlier this year, the District Court of New Mexico in *Southwest Center for Biological Diversity and Silver v. Babbitt and Clark* directed the Service to complete its critical habitat designation proposal within four months. The designation was signed on January 16, 2001 and will be published in the *Federal Register*. The Service previously published a final rule designating critical habitat for the Mexican spotted owl on June 6, 1995, but the designation was later set aside by the court for failure to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act.

The Mexican spotted owl is a medium-sized bird with dark eyes, dark to chestnut brown coloring, whitish spots on the head and neck and white mottling on the abdomen and breast. Of the three subspecies of spotted owl occurring in the United States, the Mexican spotted owl has the largest geographic range. It lives in canyon and mountain forest habitats across a range that extends from southern Utah and Colorado, through Arizona, New Mexico, and west Texas, to the mountains of central Mexico. The owl occupies a fragmented distribution throughout its United States range corresponding to the availability of forested mountains and canyons, and, in some cases, rocky canyon lands. Find more information and links on the owl at <http://southwest.fws.gov> under Hot Topics-Mexican spotted owl photographs.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 93-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses more than 530 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

<<http://southwest.fws.gov>>

MEXICAN SPOTTED OWL

CRITICAL HABITAT ACREAGE BY LAND OWNERSHIP AND STATE

Agency	Arizona	New Mexico	Colorado	Utah	Total
Forest Service	0	0	375,837	274,616	650,453
Bureau of Land Management .	10,473	14,346	148,894	1,646,388	1,820,101
National Park Service	796,292	35,255	0	643,328	1,474,875
Department of Defense	24,038	4,145	0	0	28,183
Bureau of Reclamation	0	0	0	270,276	270,276
Unknown Federal*	0	0	0	385,995	385,995
Total	830,803	53,746	524,731	3,220,603	4,629,883
Total critical habitat units	11	6	2	5	24

*Includes land identified in the current Utah land ownership file as National Recreation Area or National Recreation Area/ Power Withdrawal; Federal land ownership is unclear (may be NPS, BOR, or other).