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Interior Withdraws Legally Flawed Plan for Oregon Forests, Presses For Sustainable Timber Harvests

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Because the previous Administration failed to follow established administrative procedure before leaving office, its plan to intensify logging in western Oregon – known as the Western Oregon Plan Revisions (WOPR) – is legally indefensible and must be withdrawn, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar said today.

Moreover, Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife and Parks Thomas Strickland said that the federal government will ask the District Court to vacate the Fish and Wildlife Service’s 2008 revision of the critical habitat for the spotted owl, on which the WOPR was in part based, because Interior’s Inspector General determined that the decisionmaking process for the owl’s recovery plan was potentially jeopardized by improper political influence.

“We have carefully reviewed the lawsuits filed against the WOPR and it is clear that as a result of the previous Administration’s late actions, the plan cannot stand up in court and, if defended, could lead to years of fruitless litigation and inaction,” said Secretary Salazar. “Now, at a time when western Oregon communities are already struggling, we face the fallout of the previous Administration’s skirting of the law and efforts to taint scientific outcomes. It is important that we act swiftly to restore certainty to timber harvests on BLM lands and to protect vital timber infrastructure in these tough economic times.”

To help protect jobs and timber infrastructure in the region, Salazar directed the Bureau of Land Management—in coordination with the Fish and Wildlife Service—to identify ecologically sound timber sales under the Northwest Forest Plan that can get wood to the mills over the coming months. With the withdrawal of the WOPR, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) forests in western Oregon will again be managed under the Northwest Forest Plan, which guided BLM timber sales from 1994 until December 2008.

Salazar noted that the legal problem with the Western Oregon Plan Revisions, which was finalized in late December 2008, arose from the previous Administration’s decision not to

complete consultation on the plan's impacts on endangered species under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act. The WOPR also partially relied on spotted owl protections that have been challenged in federal court and have been called into question by Interior's Inspector General, who determined that the integrity of the decision making process was potentially jeopardized as a result of the improper political influence of a former Bush Administration official.

Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife and Parks Thomas Strickland said today that the federal government will conduct a thorough review of the 2008 Spotted Owl Recovery Plan, which informed both the WOPR and the Fish and Wildlife Service's 2008 revision of critical habitat for the spotted owl.

"We will work with the scientific community to ensure that the spotted owl recovery plan lives up to its name, by accounting for scientific and technical reviews by prominent national scientific organizations, as well as forthcoming new data on the status of the spotted owl population," said Strickland. "A solid, peer-reviewed recovery plan will provide a road map for the spotted owl's return to health, enabling us to designate critical habitat areas and help develop a forest management plan that meaningfully contributes to its recovery."

If the court agrees to vacate the Service's 2008 critical habitat revision, designated critical habitat for the spotted owl would revert to the 6.9 million acres designated in 1992 until a new designation is finalized.

Secretary Salazar said that despite the late actions of the previous Administration, Senator Ron Wyden, Governor Ted Kulongoski, Senator Jeff Merkley, Congressman Peter DeFazio, and others have helped build consensus around a vision for forestry on Oregon's BLM lands that moves the region beyond the battles of the past. "There is broadening agreement that it is time to reevaluate the logging of old growth forests on BLM lands," said Secretary Salazar. "There is also agreement that logging should not occur in areas that would put water quality at risk, and we should fully consider advances in forestry and increased knowledge of species' needs over the last two decades."

While the FWS revises its Recovery Plan, the BLM will explore the development of local, collaborative planning processes in areas where timber harvest is particularly important – and often controversial – such as in the Roseburg and Medford Districts. These collaborative efforts could serve as the starting point for the eventual development of new resource management plans for Western Oregon.

"Local and tribal communities, stakeholders, and the dedicated men and women of the BLM and the FWS in the Pacific Northwest have worked very hard on these issues for many years," said Secretary Salazar. "Their expertise and experience will be essential as we work to craft a timber program that can ensure a sustainable economic and environmental future for the Pacific Northwest."

Acting Assistant Secretary for Land and Minerals Management Ned Farquhar emphasized that forest restoration and timber harvest are dual, compatible goals. "We can support a strong and

sustainable forest industry by focusing on thinning, forest restoration projects, and certain types of regeneration harvests,” said Farquhar. “Done right, timber harvests can increase the structural complexity of stands, provide better habitat for spotted owls and other wildlife, reduce the risk of catastrophic fire, provide revenue for Western Oregon counties, and generate a reliable and robust supply of timber for local mills and biomass plants.”

Interior agencies are taking several immediate and coordinated steps to help local communities, said Farquhar. They will engage local stakeholders, counties, elected officials, and the State of Oregon to put appropriate projects online as fast as possible. “We will keep offering timber for sale, we will do all we can to maintain western Oregon’s timber infrastructure, and we will work with the timber industry to extend existing contracts.”

Additional information on the Department’s decision and the Northwest Forest Plan are online at www.doi.gov and www.blm.gov.

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