

Summary of Notable Changes in the 2012 Final Mexican Spotted Owl Recovery Plan

Definitions

Primary Threat – “...in the U.S. (but likely not in Mexico) has transitioned from timber harvest to an increased risk of stand-replacing wildland fire.”

Levels of Management

1. **Protected Activity Center (PAC):** PACs encompass a minimum of 600 acres surrounding known owl nest/roost sites (see p. 258).
2. **Recovery Habitat:** Ponderosa pine-Gambel oak, mixed-conifer, and riparian forest outside of PACs that either:
 - “Currently is, or has the potential for becoming nest/roost habitat or”
 - “Does or could provide foraging, dispersal, or wintering habitats (see p. 265).”
3. **Other Forest and Woodland Types:** includes ponderosa pine forest, spruce-fir forest, and pinyon-juniper woodland (see p. 271).

***These broadly-defined levels replace those described in the old Recovery Plan such as protected and restricted areas, and target threshold conditions.

Ecological Management Unit (EMU) – referred to in old Recovery Plan as “Recovery Unit.” The Coconino is located in the Upper Gila Mountain EMU.

Guidelines

Establishing & Decommissioning PACs (see pp. 259 & 264)

- Detailed information about when it is appropriate to establish a PAC and guidelines for to draw the boundaries are described. See Box C.1 for details about the criteria that need to be met to designate an owl site as a PAC.
- Two cases are described where decommissioning a PAC is a possibility. One is where vegetation in the PAC has been substantially altered by wildfire, insects, or other disturbances. The second is in cases where PACs were created using less stringent criteria than described in Box C.1. The procedures on how to proceed with both cases are described.

Forest Management in PACs (p. 261)

- **Strategic Placement of Treatments:** Encourages a landscape approach to forest management that helps prioritize treatments areas that mitigate risk of large wildfires while minimizing impacts to PACs. Also strives to create a mosaic of different forest composition & structure.
- **Area Limitations:** Can mechanically treat up to 20% of the non-core PAC area across the entire Ecological Management Unit (formerly Recovery Unit). It is up to the USFWS to determine when we have reached 20%, so until we hear otherwise we can propose mechanical treatments in all the PACs we want.

- Types of Treatments: Outside of the nest core, combinations of mechanical and prescribed fire treatments may be used to reduce fire risk in PACs while maintaining or improving habitat conditions for the owl and its prey.
- Seasonal Restrictions: This remains the same. Treatments should occur outside of the breeding season (March 1 – August 31) to minimize disturbance to resident owls, unless nonbreeding is inferred or confirmed that year per the accepted survey protocol.
- Monitoring Treatment Effects on Owls: In conjunction with the USFWS, a monitoring strategy needs to be designed and implemented to evaluate effects of treatments on owls and retention of or movement towards desired conditions. This is not to be conducted in every PAC that is treated. The focus will be on conducting monitoring in larger landscape-level projects across the range of the owl (e.g., Four Forest Restoration Initiative, Sacramento Mountains, Flagstaff Watershed Protection Project).

Management of Nest/Roost Forested Recovery Habitats (see p. 267)

- Retain Large Trees: while no diameter caps are identified, it is recommended that trees ≥ 46 - cm (18 inches) dbh not be removed in these stands unless there are compelling safety reasons or if it can be demonstrated removal of such trees will not be detrimental to owl habitat.
- Strive for Spatial Heterogeneity: “Incorporate natural variation, such as irregular tree spacing and various stand/patch/group/clump sizes, into management prescriptions...both within and between stands.”
- Manage for Species Diversity: “Maintain all species of native vegetation on the landscape, including early seral species.”
- Emphasize Large Hardwoods

****See Tables C.2 & C.3 for information about both descriptive and quantitative measures of desired conditions in MSO nest/roost habitats****

Management of Foraging/Non-breeding Forested Recovery Habitats (see p. 268)

- Emphasize Large Hardwoods
- Retain Large Trees: while no diameter caps are identified, “strive to retain (do not cut) all trees > 61 cm (> 24 in) dbh...unless overriding management situations require their removal to protect human safety and/or property (e.g., the removal of hazard trees along roads, in campgrounds, and along power lines), or in situations where leaving large trees precludes reducing threats to owl habitat (e.g., creating a fuel break).”
- Retain Key Owl Habitat Element: Design and implement treatments that retain most hardwoods, large snags (> 46 cm [18 in] dbh), large downed logs (> 46 cm [18 in] diameter at any point), and trees (> 46 cm [18 in] dbh) unless this conflicts with forest restoration and/or owl habitat enhancement goals.

Management of Riparian Recovery Habitat (see p. 270)

- Proper Functioning Condition: “Manage for PFC to attain the highest ecological status and potential natural community structure (i.e., mid- to late-seral conditions) possible within the capability and potential of the site.”

- Species Diversity: “Manage for a diversity of age and size classes of native riparian trees and shrubs along with a diverse understory of native riparian herbaceous species.”
- Grazing Effects: “Where needed, minimize negative impacts of ungulate grazing on riparian vegetation by modifying livestock grazing systems (i.e., changing seasons and duration of use, establishment of riparian pastures, and providing periods of complete rest), reducing grazing pressure by livestock and wild ungulates through stocking and population management, and/or establishing riparian exclosures (i.e., either livestock or livestock/wildlife ungulate exclosures).”
- Minimize Construction Activities: “Avoid construction activities (e.g., road or trail building) in recovery riparian areas.”
- Selective Tree Removal: “Minimize effects of tree removal by eliminating removal where possible or by restricting removal so that habitat components (e.g., large trees, snags, and large downed logs) are conserved.”

Noise Disturbance – no definition was provided in previous plan (see p. 295)

- Breeding-season (March 1 – August 31) restrictions are needed if noise levels are estimated to exceed 69 dBA consistently (i.e., >twice/hour) or for an extended period of time (>1 hr) within **50 meters** of known MSO nesting sites or within entire PAC if nesting sites are not known.
- For reference, 70 dBA is equal to noise level of a vacuum cleaner when standing 10 feet away or a car when standing 100 feet away. Standing 10 feet from an idling chainsaw averages around 80 dBA.

Fuels Reduction/Prescribed Fire/WUI (see p. 274 & p. 286)

- Recommended order of treatment to restore forest health and reduce fire severity:
 1. Forests types that aren’t classified as PACs or recovery habitat (i.e. ponderosa pine forest, spruce-fir forest, and pinyon-juniper woodland)
 2. Foraging, dispersal, and wintering recovery habitats (surrounding PAC and areas down-slope)
 3. Nest/roost recovery habitats
 4. Inside PACs
- Light burning of surface and low-lying fuels can occur within PACs, including the core area. “Planned or unplanned fires should be allowed to enter core areas only if they are expected to burn at low intensity with low severity effects.”
- In PAC cores, treatments other than prescribed fire are not discussed, so at USFWS discretion.
- Treatments still require adequate safeguards to minimize loss of key habitat components for owls and their prey (see Table C.2).
- Salvaging logging in PACs after stand-replacing fire will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis (see p. 263).

Range (see p. 289)

- Guidelines for grazing management stress the importance of focusing on the effects of domestic livestock AND wild ungulates on vegetative cover, especially in areas where the growth of upland woody deciduous species is affected.
- “Appropriate grazing management should be designed to provide a target level of residual vegetation that would attain or sustain moderate to high similarity to potential natural vegetation, or otherwise favorable habitat characteristics for the spotted owl and its prey.” Details are provided for timing of monitoring (both dormant and growing season) and how to determine if targets are being met.

Roads/Utilities/Energy Projects (see p. 291)

- No construction of new facilities or roads or expansion of existing facilities or roads should occur in PACs during the breeding season.
- Maintenance activities in PACs including utility-line maintenance and road repairs should be conducted outside of the breeding season unless pressing reasons dictate otherwise.

Recreation (see p. 293)

- Any construction of new facilities (e.g., trailheads, OHV trails) or expansion of existing facilities within PACs should be considered on a case-specific basis.
- Maintenance activities in PACs including trail maintenance and removal of hazard trees should be conducted outside of the breeding season unless pressing reasons dictate otherwise.
- Managers should assess the presence and intensity of currently allowed (permitted and non-permitted) recreational activities in PACs, including distance, frequency, duration, and source of the disturbance. Disturbance is defined as the presence of 1 -12 people; group sizes exceeding 12 people should not be allowed. Guidelines are provided for allowable frequency of disturbance (see p. 294).