

Region 5 California Spotted Owl Project-Specific Plan Amendment

Background

Recent projects within the [2004 Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment](#) (i.e., “Framework”) footprint have been incorporating project-specific plan amendments regarding California spotted owl (CSO) habitat. These amendments are intended to align with the management recommendations in the 2019 [California Spotted Owl Conservation Strategy](#) (Conservation Strategy).

January 2024 Regional Forester Direction

A letter from Regional Forester Jennifer Eberlien directed Framework forests with projects that contain Conservation Strategy related amendments to coordinate with the Regional Office and use consistent amendment language. In response, Region 5 Ecosystem Planning, working with Region 5 Ecosystem Management, has developed plan amendment components that are required for projects that 1) may impact California spotted owl habitat in the Sierra Nevada and 2) are pursuing a project-specific forest plan amendment.

June 2024 Project-Specific Plan Amendment Components

The Region 5 California Spotted Owl Project-Specific Plan Amendment components incorporate updated scientific information given the need to update our management approaches due to wildfire threats to California spotted owl. The amendment components are provided to ensure consistency and efficiency in project planning and Endangered Species Act consultation.

Projects that would deviate from revised land management plans (Inyo, Sierra, and Sequoia national forests and Lake Tahoe Basin Management

Unit) or the Framework (Eldorado, Lassen, Modoc, Plumas, Stanislaus, and Tahoe national forests) must use the Region 5 project-specific amendment.



Figure 1 Region 5 forests falling within the footprint of the 2004 Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment (outlined in red) are required to use the June 2024 Region 5 amendment components if pursuing a project-specific amendment that would affect California spotted owls.

The June 2024 document entitled “Project-specific Plan Amendments for California Spotted Owl Habitat” provides regional guidance for future projects within the range of the Sierra Nevada CSO Distinct Population Segment that incorporate a project-specific Forest Plan amendment related to management of CSO habitat. The guidance was created for internal agency management and is not intended to establish fixed legal direction enforceable by third parties. The plan amendment components set forth in the document are expected to be “living” components that will evolve based on feedback from forest managers and evolving scientific understandings.

Furthermore, the biological terms, definitions, and guidance in the plan amendment components are solely applicable to CSO habitat management; they should not be applied in other contexts without approval from the Regional Office (for example, the definitions of “large” and “very large” may be inappropriate in other contexts).

Is the project-specific plan amendment process required for all projects?

No, the amendment process is NOT required. If forests choose to align projects with the Framework or their existing land management plan, there is no need for an amendment.

How were the project-specific plan amendment components developed?

The amendment components were developed collaboratively based on forest plan content in the 2023 Sierra and Sequoia Forest Plans and modified based on 1) lessons learned from recent project-specific forest plan amendments, 2) feedback from internal and external engagement, and 3) the draft California Spotted Owl programmatic consultation.

How does the project-specific plan amendment differ from the Framework?

The project-specific plan amendment addresses wildfire threats to both forest and owls by balancing treatments with habitat conservation. Specifically, the project-specific plan amendment components differ from the Framework plan content in the following ways:

- Shifts from mapping home range core areas (HRCAs) to territories;
- Allows more intensive treatment in territories;
- Allows for more reduction of canopy cover in territories;
- Includes a wider range of suitable habitat in the desired condition, and steers activities to produce more heterogenous habitat;
- Allows limited treatments in protected activity centers (PACs);
- Contains plan content with lower habitat retention thresholds in wildland urban

interface (WUI) Defense Zones, fuelbreaks, and areas identified as being very high risk in fire risk assessments.

Do the project-specific plan amendment components align with Endangered Species Act consultation?

The project-specific plan amendment components are in-line with the options in the programmatic Biological Assessment that Region 5 Ecosystem Management developed in coordination with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The amendment can guide project design to align with the programmatic consultation, which will significantly increase project planning efficiency.

Can changes be made to the project-specific plan amendment components?

The project-specific plan amendment components are a “living document” that may be updated by the Regional Office based on what we learn through the process of incorporating the amendment components into projects.

How do we get started?

If your forest is considering a project-specific plan amendment, **contact Region 5 Ecosystem Planning for support** as early as possible, ideally prior to scoping. Early coordination is especially important because the amendment will affect project design and there are specific public notification requirements throughout the amendment process. Through early and continued coordination, we can ensure the intent of the amendment is carried out in the project design and reflected in the analysis efficiently and effectively.



Figure 2 If considering a project-specific plan amendment, engage with the regional office prior to scoping, and during project design and analysis.

Will the project-specific plan amendment components be shared publicly?

We will publish the project-specific plan amendment components on the [Region 5 planning website](#) (external). Forest staff and leadership are encouraged to share the website link with partners and other interested stakeholders, as appropriate.

Where can I find more information or support?

- Project-specific plan amendment components and supporting resources are available at the [CSO Project Specific Plan Amendment SharePoint](#) site (internal).
- Region 5 [guidance](#) for mapping CSO territories is also available on Pinyon (internal).
- For more information about the amendment process, contact **Regional Planner, Michael Carson**, michael.carson@usda.gov.