

# Agencies wary of panel's owl recommendation

PORTLAND (AP) — Key federal agencies are backing away from a scientific panel's recommendation that more old growth timber be set aside for the northern spotted owl. The Oregonian newspaper says.

"There are moves afoot in the Forest Service, Department of Agriculture and Department of Interior to put the kibosh on the Jack Ward Thomas report," said an unnamed source affiliated with an environmental group.

The interagency report called for a network of large reserves to protect the spotted owl's habitat in western Oregon and Washington and Northern Cali-

fornia. The reserves would cover 8.4 million acres and withdraw about 3 million acres of commercial forest land from logging.

A federal agency source said Agriculture Department officials were not prepared for the "politically volatile" nature of the economic impact.

The sources, all of whom asked not to be identified, cited several developments as evidence that federal agencies were distancing themselves from the explosive report.

A top U.S. Forest Service official in Washington, D.C., called regional agency chiefs last week and asked them not

to sign a letter endorsing the scientific credibility of the report. The Oregonian reported in its Saturday editions.

A Forest Service study on the economic impact of the spotted owl conservation plan has been kept under wraps for nearly two weeks and even was withheld from a congressional committee this week. The plan originally was to be released to members of the Northwest congressional delegation on April 16.

Northwest Regional Forester John Butruille quietly lifted a freeze on timber sales in the proposed owl reserves last week. When he announced the

freeze two weeks ago, he said it would stay in effect at least until May 1 and perhaps longer. Last week he said the sales could go ahead as long as they weren't within a half mile of an owl nest.

"We were concerned about the effect on the industry," said Wendall Jones, director of timber management in Forest Service's regional office. "It has somewhat been living hand to mouth."

On Friday, a spokeswoman in the agency's regional office said the report's scheduled May 1 release had been postponed once again, indefinitely. Meanwhile, state officials

canceled the scheduled release of a state report on the economic impact of the owl conservation plan.

Gail Achterman, Gov. Neil Goldschmidt's natural resources administrator, had promised to release the report Friday afternoon.

But Goldschmidt spokesman Gregg Kantor said the governor "is making changes on the letter he's sending to the delegation" accompanying the report. Kantor said the report, detailing the plan's effect on state and national forest timber sales in Oregon, would be released early this week.

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