

Fair share



11-month-old Ashlyn McGraw gives her father, Michael, a bite of her cracker Thursday while she waits for mom to finish classes for the day at the University. Photo by Swan Poston

BLM biologist says habitat standard not crucial for owl

NORTHWEST PORTLAND (AP) — A controversial standard for spotted owl habitat shouldn't be broadly applied, because it is based on consensus rather than science, a U.S. Bureau of Land Management biologist testified Thursday.

Under cross-examination, Joseph Lint said diminishing forest habitat for the owl wouldn't scuttle plans for boosting the bird's numbers, but would slow them down.

Lint's remarks came during the second day of hearings held on behalf of the Endangered Species Committee, a cabinet-level federal panel known as the "God Squad" for its power to let a species go extinct if the economic cost is too high.

The BLM has asked the committee to exempt 44 timber sales in Western Oregon from the Endangered Species Act. The sales represent a third of the agency's timber offerings last year.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the northern spotted owl as a threatened species in 1990 due to loss of old-growth forest habitat. The agency blocked the BLM timber sales on grounds that logging the 4,000 acres of forest would jeopardize bird's survival.

Lint's comments, before an administrative law judge, involved an owl habitat standard known as the "50-11-40" rule. It calls for restricting logging so that at least 50 percent of the land has trees with trunks averaging at least 11 inches in diameter and the trees' canopy shades 40 percent of the land.

There is evidence that such areas provide the habitat owls need to survive, Lint said.

The Forest Service, Fish and Wildlife and National Park Service have adopted the standard, but BLM has not, saying it

would take too big a bite out of timber offerings from its lands.

Lawyers for agencies and groups opposing the timber sale exemption honed in on the BLM stance in questioning Lint.

He said it was adopted as a "consensus based on available information" rather than the product of scientific studies.

To use the rule to analyze biological impacts on the owl "would not be appropriate at this time," he said in written testimony submitted to the committee.

He said it requires about 40 years for timber to grow big enough to meet the standard.

Lint said the 50 percent component of the rule is the weak part, because there's inadequate information about whether that much landscape needs 11-inch trees for owls to survive there.

Scientists have said that owls need a forest with a multi-storied canopy to hide from predators such as the goshawk. The owls nest in cavities in big old trees. They feed on rodents over a wide area.

In cross-examination, Lint said the federal plan for protecting the owl is seen as a 75- to 100-year plan, and a delay of two or three years in adopting final habitat standards would not defeat the plan.

Asked if decreasing timber habitat in the meantime would hamper the owl recovery plan, Lint said it would "diminish the rapidity with which success could be achieved."

Despite the tough questioning, the U.S. Interior Department's top lawyer said Thursday the hearings were going "great."

Thomas Sansonetti met with reporters at the end of the second day of hearings to say laying ground rules takes time because the committee is rarely convened.

Trojan safety violations found

PORTLAND (AP) — The Nuclear Regulatory Commission says it has found apparent safety violations at the Trojan nuclear plant near Rainier.

The NRC said in a report that Portland General Electric Co., the plant operator and majority owner, failed to periodically inspect certain pressure valves, resulting in incorrect settings.

If a serious accident occurred, the valves are supposed to protect plant systems from reaching high pressures and help guard against a prolonged release of radioactive steam.

To date, inspectors have found that 62 percent of the valves checked were incorrectly set.

In addition, the NRC is reviewing six less-seri-

ous problems with the plant's control of radiation. The agency has not decided whether to cite PGE for the valve or radiation-control problems.

Trojan has been shut down since last March because of defective steam generator tubes. The company has asked for permission to temporarily change its operating license so it can restart but no date has been set. The NRC will decide by Jan. 29 whether to grant PGE's request.

Adam Bless, a state nuclear safety inspector at Trojan, said the problem surfaced in April when a steam valve failed to reset properly.

The NRC said PGE missed "numerous opportunities" to find and correct these problems despite federal notices.

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