



JACK OHMAN, THE OREGONIAN

AS THE LAST TREE IN OREGON IS ABOUT TO BE FELLED, THE LAST SPOTTED OWL ADAPTS...

A DOOMED SPECIES?

SPOTTED OWL MAY BE LOSING ITS LONG FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL

BY PAUL KOBERSTEIN

Last December, 50 scientists flocked to Fort Collins, Colorado, to compare field notes on one of the great environmental enigmas of our time — the behavior of the northern spotted owl.

Never before had there been such a large convention of owl experts. These scientists had been counting spotted owls in 11 separate studies since the mid-1980s, when it first became apparent the owl faced a large risk of extinction if logging continued unabated in old growth forests. They brought all their data to Fort Collins. Experts in statistics were on hand to analyze the numbers.

After 12 days of meetings, they emerged with bad news for the ancient forests' poster bird. They found that the annual death rate of adult female owls had been steadily going up since 1985. Second, the population of female owls had been going down by about 4.5% a year. At this rate, the population will be reduced by half in about 15 years. Finally, and most alarming, they found the rate of decline was accelerating.

The findings suggest we may already be approaching the extinction threshold for the northern spotted owl, says the organizer of the Fort Collins meeting, biologist Russell Lande of the University of Oregon. "They cast serious doubt on whether the population can survive any additional habitat loss."

Moreover, Lande says, the results could have serious implications for the forest ecosystems. The owl has long been considered an indicator of old growth forest health.

Looming over the Fort Collins convocation was a series of landmark political and scientific developments in owlism.

When the scientists met, the first draft of President Clinton's new plan for Northwest forests, Option 9, had just emerged from the printer. It is now final, and, pending affirmation by the federal courts, will give a significant portion of remaining old growth to loggers — illustrating the fact that the findings at Fort Collins were not universally accepted among owl biologists.

"My own gut feeling is that things aren't that dire," says Joseph Zisa, a member of the government's owl research team.

Thus, with the Clinton plan nominally in effect, the Northwest's old growth forests are still in turmoil. Option 9 is a complex political compromise that takes into account both science and the existing political climate. While it slows the momentum of the timber industry, it also may do irreparable harm to the forest ecosystem, hundreds of species and, in particular, the northern spotted owl.

Adding to the confusion are confounding reports from northern California that the owl may be doing quite well among second-growth redwood forests. The redwood data are troubling to some owl biologists, but not because they are invalid. It has been well known for a long time that a large number of owls live among young redwood stands. But the redwood owl data are the exception, not the rule, for a species whose range stretches from San Francisco to the Canadian border and beyond. Owls are thought to survive well in young redwood stands because the trees there quickly regenerate.

North of the Oregon/California border, however, where slower growing Douglas firs dominate the landscape, no

evidence shows the owl in good health. Its demise in Oregon and Washington is the result of years of irresponsible cutting. What is disturbing about the redwood owl data is its exaggeration by the timber industry, whose underlying goal is to discredit the owl's legal status as a threatened species.

One who fell for the industry's public relations ploy was Gregg Easterbrook, a leading environmental journalist who writes in a forthcoming book, excerpted March 28 in *The New Republic*, that owl extinction claims are "pressurized with hot air." After a walk in the redwoods with industry biologists, he was given to believe that there were too many of the damn birds and no reason to deprive loggers of work.

The distortions in Easterbrook's book foster the impression that all is well in the Northwest forest ecosystem. Taken seriously, they may undermine efforts to discard the ecologically damaging — many say illegal — land management practices employed by the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management.

Clinton's forest plan, which revises those unsound practices, is not so clear cut. It prescribes a new forest policy that goes a long way toward protecting and restoring the damaged ecosystem at the same time it makes room for logging. Moreover, the plan has credibility in that it is backed by many leading scientists and environmentalists as well as the timber industry giant, Weyerhaeuser Co.

While it is naive to reduce the Northwest forest controversy to a simple "jobs vs. owls" formula — the dilemma is far more complex — it can be instructive to view Option 9 through this prism.

Option 9 emerged in the aftermath of the historic Forest Summit a year ago in Portland, where President Clinton charged the Forest Service and BLM with developing a plan for preserv-

ing the spotted owl and managing the entire Northwest forest ecosystem. At the same time, he ordered them to offer some timber for sale.

"Where sound management policies can preserve the health of forest lands, sales should go forward," the President said.

Government scientists proposed 10 alternatives. A Forest Ecosystem Management Team analyzed seven of the plans for their impacts on more than 1,000 animal and plant species. What emerged was a professional opinion poll on the chances for each species to survive under seven scenarios.

The winning alternative was number 9, modeled largely after a 1990 Interagency Scientific Committee plan for conserving the owl. Jack Ward Thomas, now chief of the Forest Service, headed that panel; Thomas also led the Option 9 team.

Option 9 was not selected for its biological merits. Other alternatives would provide better stewardship of the forest ecosystem. Option 9's attraction is timber for harvest. It allows loggers to remove about 30% of the remaining old growth. About 1.4 million acres of old growth could be cut. Most of the old growth to be protected — about 3.2 million acres — lies within a series of Late Successful Reserves. These will not be managed as wilderness, since the plan permits commercial thinning as well as salvage logging following wildfires.

The reserves are spaced several miles apart. The old growth within them is already highly fragmented by past logging.

Land between the reserves is called "matrix" land, and there loggers will be permitted to nibble away at the old growth as well as grow single species for future harvest. Restricted logging will also be permitted in research areas and riparian areas.

At one time, the ancient forests covered about three-fourths of the land west of the Cascades. A century and a half of logging has reduced these forests to about 5% of their former extent.

Until recently, the timber industry was hell-bent on transforming the entire forest into intensively managed "tree farms," save for a few hundred-thousand acres of old growth locked up in wilderness. The industry has been clearing the entire landscape — removing all wood of value — and burning the rest. After replanting the former forest with single-species crops of Douglas fir or cedar, it's been destroying competing vegetation by herbicide.

In ecological terms, the few old growth patches that remain are similar to islands. The effect is called "fragmentation," and it occurs across the Northwest forest landscape. Fragmentation poses a serious risk to the owl and many other species by limiting areas for forage, nesting and dispersal. Some patches of old growth are too small to be useful to a number of species that depend on the deep woods for cover.

Option 9 recognizes that destruction of old growth habitat will continue. Nevertheless, it implicitly assumes that gradual maturation of regrown forest will eventually provide habitat that will lead to recovery of the owl. Some scientists say this scheme is particularly risky to wildlife. The timber industry responds by calling their fears groundless.

For all its faults, the algebra in Gregg Easterbrook's jobs vs. owls formula is provocative: "Clinton's plan to shut down most Washington and Oregon logging may not only be unnecessary, it may be resting on an illusion." That illusion, he says, is an owl extinction alarm predicated on two notions: that the owl lives only in ancient forests, and that a last, fragile, dwindling population of only about 4,000 pairs exists in Oregon and Washington. "New research suggests neither notion is true," he says.

CLINTON FOREST PLAN COSTS TAXPAYERS

The Clinton forest plan will cost you plenty.

That's the message in a new economic report commissioned by the Oregon Natural Resources Council. "Option 9 is not only harmful to fish and forests, it will hurt taxpayers and the economy, too," according to ONRC's Mark Hubbard.

Based on estimates of the increases for managing national forests in an ecologically sound way and the decreased amount of timber available, ONRC calculates that new timber sales will lose taxpayers \$205 for every 1,000 board feet sold during 1995.

The Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management estimate they will be able to offer 450 million board feet under Option 9 during 1995, for total taxpayer losses of \$92.2 million. In essence, Hubbard says, virtually every national forest is now a money loser.

"The message of the Clinton plan is clear. The more we cut the more it costs. The President is asking you to pay once with your environment and again with your tax dollars. On both counts, the plan is an outrageous waste."

—WILD OREGON

Wild Oregon is a newsletter published by the Oregon Natural Resources Council.

*The Clinton Forest plan covers 24 million acres of public land in three states and is the first of its kind designed to assure the survival of an entire ecosystem. The plan for old growth forests west of the Cascades designates 160 watersheds where no logging or road building may take place until studies are completed. In 80% of the region's old growth forests, logging is limited to younger trees.