

As proof, Easterbrook claims there may in fact be 10,000 owl pairs, including a few thousand of a nearly identical subspecies, the California spotted owl. "Not only is this far more birds than environmentalists have described as necessary to assure spotted owl survival; it is significantly greater than the nadirs of similar raptors that avoided extinction." The American bald eagle and peregrine falcon came to his mind. Moreover, he suggests the owl population may never have exceeded 10,000 pairs of spotted owls.

Of course, the issue is not just the owl but the ecosystem. Easterbrook finds no problem there, either. He can't find a single case of extinction in Northwest forests over the last 50 years, a period of heavy clearcutting.

He ignores the more than 100 salmon stocks that have become extinct in our lifetime. Of other salmon runs so low as to be almost extinct, Easterbrook says only that the causes are probably "natural." Environmentalists point to logging and dams among manmade threats to salmon.

He concludes: "Combined with the prospect that there are many more spotted owl pairs than previously estimated, this raises the question of whether the owl doomsday, which has costs thousands of honest people their livelihoods and occupied the attention of presidents, is at heart a false alarm."

Conversely, Easterbrook also argues that ancient forests should be protected, timber jobs restored and the constructive political power of environmentalism retained. "Honesty about owls would be a beginning," he says.

Joseph Zisa, who is a leading owl biologist at the U.S. Forest Service wildlife research station in Olympia, agrees with that statement. But he says Easterbrook's basic premise -- that owls exist in far greater numbers and in a wider diversity of habitats than previously believed -- is "blatantly, painfully, astonishingly incorrect."

Zisa says the higher number of owls being counted does not mean the population is increasing. Rather, it indicates that surveys are expanding in scope and intensity. It's like looking for balls on a golf course. The more you look, the more you find.

Moreover, the number of owls never was the issue, says biologist Charles Meslow, researcher at Oregon State. "The question is what happens to its habitat. We were never short of owls. But we are growing short of habitat."

In fact, some biologists and population ecologists contend that the trends are severe enough to assume that the owl population may soon reach a bottleneck, or a point beyond which it cannot recover.

The bottleneck theory illustrates the scientific dispute at the heart of Option 9. It was first advanced in 1988 by Russell Lande, then a researcher at the University of Chicago. Lande says all scientists agree that the owl needs a minimum amount of suitable habitat to remain viable. Implicit in Option 9 is the view that we are some distance above this threshold. Lande says the Fort Collins data indicate otherwise.

"Option 9 will not prevent extinction of the northern spotted owl," he says. "Further habitat destruction and fragmentation are likely to exacerbate the situation."

The Fort Collins findings focused on the female owl's declining survival. This makes sense, since changes in adult female survival have a much greater effect on population than any other factor. Nevertheless, the dispersal of juvenile owls is also a concern, he says, because it is occurring at rates "far short of that needed to stabilize local populations."

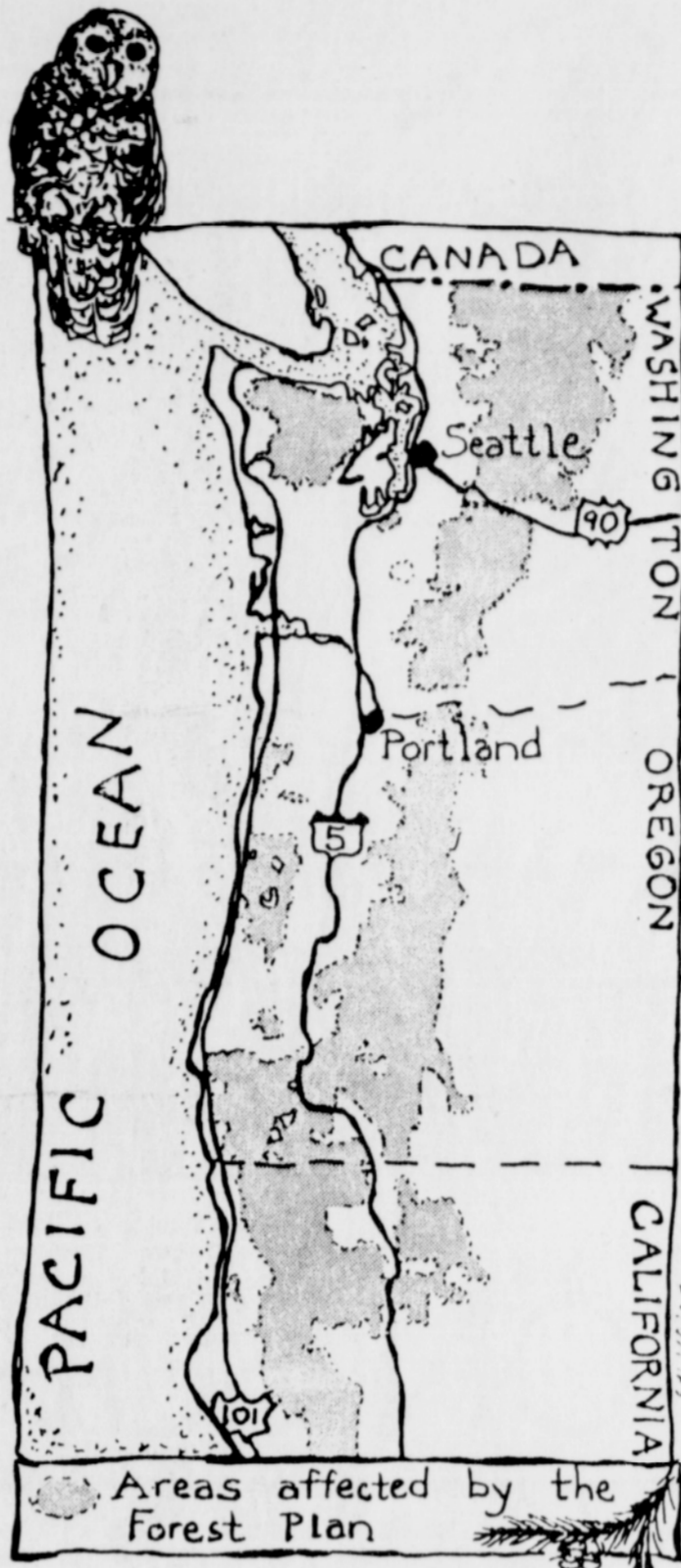
In defending Option 9's position for logging some old growth, Zisa says the Fort Collins biologists were swayed by biases and assumptions that tilted the data. "We still have some flexibility and room to maneuver," he says. "The question of what levels of risk are acceptable is something the politicians and the public have got to decide. But have we reached the point of possible extinction? My gut feeling is no."

Aside from owls, Option 9 suggests some 400 species face increased risks from logging old growth. Many of these are uncharismatic microfauna such as slugs, snails and mollusks.

On the other hand, Option 9 sets new, stronger standards for protecting salmon and trout -- species that are in danger in large part because their spawning habitat, hundreds of miles from the ocean, has been disturbed by clearcuts, roads and landslides on logged-off hillsides. Improving salmon habitat is not only good for the environment, but is necessary for the creation of fishing jobs. Banning salmon fishing seasons in the Pacific Ocean affected hundreds of people this year.

But some scientists question whether Option 9 provides adequate protection even for aquatic resources. In 164 key watersheds, an analysis of conditions is required before logging can begin. There can be no net increase in miles of road, however, and no roads can be built in roadless areas, although helicopter logging is permitted. Outside these watersheds, the strategy is unclear. The Wilderness Society estimates that 1.7 million acres of salmon habitat are outside the old growth and riparian reserves as well as the key watersheds. Additionally, the group estimates that 82 of 257 at-risk fish stocks on federal lands do not inhabit protected watersheds.

An additional problem for salmon, as well as other species, is the cumulative effect of landuse practices on federal and non-federal land. For example, most coastal streams begin their journey to the ocean high in the forested Coast Range. Eventually they pass through private forestland and then through agricultural land. Government scientists say Option 9 gives salmon species an 80% likelihood of achieving well-



DIANE SYLVAIN

distributed populations, but do not suggest how that outcome might change if cumulative effects of all land uses -- public and private -- are taken into account. Other species, including the owl, might also suffer.

Since no scientific reason exists to log old growth, a key question to be asked is whether the Option 9 plan will save endangered timber jobs.

Option 9 exposes the Northwest forest ecosystem to some amount of risk for the sake of what turns out to be a small number of "saved" timber jobs. Option 9 preserves only about 6,000 jobs when compared to a "zero cut" option where little or no old growth would be harvested. But even the 6,000-job figure may be high.

The administration used a traditional approach to evaluating job loss, but did not consider the meaningful contribution of unlogged forest to the stability of local and regional economies. At the same time, Option 9 timber sales must be subsidized by the taxpayer, given the high cost of building roads through the forest for Option 9's relatively small yield.

A study by economist Randal O'Toole shows taxpayers will pay \$205 for every 1,000 board feet sold off Northwest national forests in 1995. But would a ban on federal harvests destroy the industry? The industry this year will employ 110,000 workers and cut 11 billion board feet from private lands alone. Option 9 would add only 1 billion board feet to the total.

Many observers say the Administration could have generated as many as 20,000 jobs without putting the owl at risk by simply banning raw log exports. Critics of the ban say it violates the spirit of free trade. But countries routinely hoard valuable commodities in short supply. Oregon mills are already tapping log supplies in Montana, creating a log shortage in that state. That's one reason why Montana Senator Max Baucus and Representative Pat Williams, both Democrats, are backing a log export ban sponsored by Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Ore.

But such legislation thwarts the ubiquitous Weyerhaeuser, a reality that goes to the heart of the politics of Option 9. Last December, the Administration announced it was crafting a rule under the auspices of the Endangered Species Act that would spare the company's timberland from the duty of protecting the spotted owl. Indeed, in southwestern Oregon, where Weyerhaeuser owns 1.25 million acres, a spotted owl protection area is gerrymandered so as to exclude the Weyerhaeuser property.

Neighboring private property owners weren't so lucky, leading Rep. DeFazio to suggest the arrangement amounts to collusion: "Once again, the government and big business have combined to shaft the little guy."

Officials at Weyerhaeuser and the U.S. Interior Department insist no deals were cut. Dale Hall, associate regional director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Portland, says no attention was paid to who owned land where the lands were drawn.

It seems clear that the era of the owl is closing. Even though some scientists insist that the bird needs more protection, that Option 9 carries too many uncertainties, the tide has already turned. Over the next several years, this new view of the owl as a robust survivor will guide federal forest policy in the Northwest.

Proponents of Option 9 defend their plan as a rational departure from years of environmental hyperbole and biased science. But among the veterans of spotted owl research, one detects more than a trace of skepticism. Asked whether he endorses Option 9, OSU biologist Charles Meslow, one of the most respected owl researchers in the region, could only offer these lukewarm comments: "I have to be in support of it. And I want to be. I have to have faith."

Paul Koberstein, who covers environmental issues in Oregon, wrote this article for *High Country News*, which is published in Paonia, Colorado.

## NW FORESTS HIT BY NEW LAWSUITS

The fate of Northwest forests has been tied up in the courts since 1987, when the Portland Audubon Society sued the government for failing to address the possible extinction of the northern spotted owl.

Although the suit was later thrown out of court, a flood of litigation followed. In 1991, in a case filed by the Seattle Audubon Society and 11 other environmental groups, federal Judge William Dwyer in Seattle ruled that the government's timber sales in the Northwest failed to protect forest species such as the owls throughout the range, as required by the National Forest Management Act. Dwyer barred timber sales that would log the owl's habitat until the government changed those policies.

Dwyer's injunction was still in effect when President Clinton opened the historic Forest Summit in Portland in April 1993. He promised a solution that would "put the stalemate behind us." But the solution -- Option 9 -- has fallen short of that goal.

The judge's three-year ban on logging was not lifted until early this June, and Dwyer was careful to say that the legality of Option 9 "should be tested." He scheduled a hearing Sept. 12 to hear legal challenges to the plan.

Other lawsuits loom. On May 18, the environmental community filed a new lawsuit, this time contending that Option 9 violates the National Forest Management Act. Dwyer was scheduled to rule on the merits of this case within 120 days of the day it was filed. During this period, the 13 plaintiffs have agreed not to seek further injunctions. The plaintiffs in this case are the Oregon Natural Resources Council, Pacific Rivers

Council, Seattle Audubon Society, Headwaters, The Wilderness Society, National Audubon Society, Pilchuck Audubon Society, Western Ancient Forest Campaign, Washington Environmental Council, Klamath Forest Alliance, Northcoast Environmental Center, Portland Audubon Society and Lane County Audubon Society.

Meanwhile, all but one of the 12 plaintiffs in the 1991 suit have agreed to release 83 million board feet of timber sales enjoined by Dwyer. This deal, reached last August, has been dubbed the "Deal of Shame" by a number of groups not party to the settlement, including the Native Forest Council in Eugene. They claim the mainline groups "sold out" in giving some old growth up for harvest. The mainline groups, including the Sierra Club, Oregon natural resources Council and others, contend they feared political backlash in Congress if they failed to approve the deal. Nonetheless, the deal is being challenged in Dwyer's court by the Forest Conservation Council and Save the West and in a separate filing by the Native Forest Council.

The timber industry has filed two suits, one in U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C., that claims the Clinton forest team violated the federal open meetings law. Interestingly, a plaintiff in this case is the Native Forest Council. In March, the judge ruled against the government, but the case is likely to be merged with other litigation before Dwyer.

The other lawsuit charges Option 9 violates a law which industry claims requires the government to maximize timber harvests in western Oregon.

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