

Federal agency proposes California spotted owl protection

February 23 2023, by Olga R. Rodriguez



A northern spotted owl sits on a branch in Point Reyes, Calif., in June 1995. Federal wildlife officials on Wednesday, Feb. 22, 2023, announced a proposal to classify one of two dwindling California spotted owl populations as endangered after a court ordered them to reassess a Trump administration decision not to protect the brown and white birds. Credit: AP Photo/Tom Gallagher, File

Federal wildlife officials on Wednesday announced a proposal to classify one of two dwindling California spotted owl populations as endangered after a lawsuit by conservation groups required the government to reassess a Trump administration decision not to protect the brown and white birds.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed that California spotted owls that have their habitats in coastal and Southern California be protected under the Endangered Species Act.

That population "does not have a strong ability to withstand normal variations in environmental conditions, persist through catastrophic events, or adapt to new environmental conditions throughout its range," which led the agency to propose listing it as endangered, wildlife officials said.

The other California spotted owl population, which lives in Sierra Nevada forests in California and western Nevada, would be classified as threatened, [the agency said](#).

The habitat of the medium-sized brown owl with white spots on its head and chest and a barred tail is under serious threat from current logging practices and climate change, including increased drought, disease and more extreme wildfires.

Most California spotted owls live on land overseen by the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service.

How much the population has declined since conservation groups started their effort to protect it more than 20 years ago is unclear.

The only available demographic data on spotted owls living in coastal and Southern California was collected in San Bernardino National Forest

and shows a decline of 9%, the federal wildlife service said.

The Sierra Nevada population shows declines ranging from 50% to 31% percent in some areas, the agency said.

The federal agency's decision follows an agreement reached in November between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and several conservation groups that sued the federal agency in 2020 over its decision not to protect the California spotted owl population.

Justin Augustine, a senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the groups that sued, applauded the agency's decision and said he was happy to see the California spotted owls could finally get the safeguards they need.

Augustine said he planned to use the 60-day public comment period to push for more protections for the California spotted population in the Sierra Nevada.

"One of the things I'll be addressing is the issue of how to make sure that (Sierra Nevada) spotted owls are actually protected under their threatened status rather than potentially allowing some logging to occur that would be harmful," he said.

The California spotted owl is one of three spotted owl subspecies and the last to be protected under the Endangered Species Act, Augustine said.

The other two subspecies are the northern spotted owl and the Mexican spotted owl.

The northern spotted owl habitat is in Oregon, Washington state and Northern California. The tiny owl was listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act in 1990, sparking an intense battle over logging

in the region. In 2020, the Trump Administration refused to upgrade it to endangered status despite losing nearly 4% of its population annually.

The Mexican spotted owl was first listed as threatened in the U.S. in 1993. It is found in Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, parts of West Texas and Mexico.

The species is in danger of extinction due to loss of habitat to logging, development, mining and wildfires.

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