

California Spotted Owl Conservation Strategy Public Meeting

Summary Report

Background

The USDA Forest Service is engaged in development of a California Spotted Owl Conservation Strategy designed to provide for the short and long term needs of the spotted owl by restoring Sierra Nevada forests and conserving key elements of spotted owl habitat.

The Forest Service developed a draft plan, using the best available science, to conserve the California spotted owl by balancing maintenance of the biggest trees and canopy cover with resiliency and heterogeneity of habitat. The next step was to inform the public about the Conservation Strategy process, give them a means to provide meaningful input, and give them an opportunity to hear one another's views.

The USFS, along with interagency partners, was seeking to get as much information as possible from stakeholders in order to produce the best, and most implementable, Conservation Strategy. In addition to gathering information and feedback on two key components of the draft Strategy (Conservation Measures & Monitoring / Adaptive Management), the USFS was also interested identifying any information gaps and or additional resources that would be important for consideration in the development of the Conservation Strategy.

Public Meeting Process

To achieve these goals, a public meeting was held in McClellan, CA on Sept 22, 2016 to discuss the California Spotted Owl Conservation Strategy. Over 60 people, representing 17 different NGOs, State agencies, Federal agencies and universities, gathered to assist the Forest Service in the development of the Strategy to conserve the California Spotted Owl in the Sierra-Cascade Ecoregion.

In preparation for the meeting participants were asked to review draft materials, including the draft strategy and the conservation assessment, which were made available on the website:

<http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r5/plants-animals/wildlife/?cid=fseprd503343>

The meeting was opened by Bernie Gyant, Deputy Regional Forester, USFS, R5, who welcomed participants and thanked them for dedicating an entire day to assisting in the review of the Conservation Strategy and for their willingness to provide constructive input.

The workshop was designed and facilitated by Dr. Onnie Byers of the Conservation Breeding Specialist Group (CBSG). CBSG has 30 years of experience in conservation planning, formulating methods to bring people together to exchange information, share ideas, and work together to create positive conservation change. CBSG is committed to the application of sound science to the decision-making process and to needed management actions, and to the belief that early engagement of the broad

spectrum of people with a stake in the issue is essential if management recommendations are to succeed. Dr. Byers provided an overview of agenda and the workshop process including asking for agreement on a set of workshop ground rules:

- All ideas are valid
- Key points recorded on flip charts
- Everyone participates; no one dominates
- Listen to each other
- Treat each other with respect
- Seek common ground
- Don't let differences derail the group (use parking lot)
- Observe time frames

The agenda included small group session to promote interaction among participants and focused discussions on the two topic areas of the strategy - conservation measures and monitoring and adaptive management. Each small group session began with an overview, and question and answer period, on that section of the strategy. After each small group session, a plenary report back session was held to ensure all participants heard, and had the opportunity to provide feedback on, the comments presented.

The Results

The small groups worked intensely and productively, resulting in an enormous amount of valuable feedback, questions of clarification and suggestions for enhancing the Conservation Strategy. These comments were captured, collated and categorized below. This report is a reflection of the work of the participants during the workshop. Valuable feedback received after the workshop will be reviewed and used to inform revisions to the Conservation Strategy.

I. Habitat & Protected Activity Centers (PACs)

Conservation Measures Discussion

- Clarify trees that need to be retained don't need to have all 3 characteristics
- Needs more specificity on what 'resilient habitat condition' is and what it is resilient to
- Details on a few more things like, how many feet to nesting tree?
- Logging bigger trees makes sense
- Broad agreement for managing for high canopy cover
- With respect to maintaining old large trees:
 - oaks and hardwoods are very important for biodiversity,
 - age and structure more important than size of trees, don't focus only on diameter
- There may be an excess of large trees (i.e. more than we need). We should just log extra trees (skeptical)
- Result in overly modifying habitat; shift paces boundaries around to meet fuel reductions requirements
- 'Promoting future habitat' - need more information on how to do that
- PACs adjacent to private lands
- Knowing how a PAC would be influenced would be helpful

- Retiring PACs
 - Need better criteria on how and when to retire them
 - Different time frames associated with fire disturbance
 - No clear line between goals and objectives on 2c
 - 2a - artificial nest structure?
- Specifics
 1. Tree mortality and how to retire PACs
 2. What features are they talking about
 3. Consistency between survey protocols - 3 years vs conservation strategy years
- Protecting occupied PACs and managing rest of landscape for resiliency
- Retiring occupied PACs
- When determine where to retired PACs, better monitoring data
- 2a – dynamic PACs using adoptive manage men to altered where PACs are...could facilitate using fire resiliency but could mean retain occupancy territories
- 3 years isn't long enough to determine if owls are using PAC or not

Monitoring and Adaptive Management Discussion

- Long term population responses to habitat variables:
 1. Changes in landscapes
 2. PAC
 3. Territory scale
 4. HRCA scale
- Protecting areas from increasing predation?
- Assumption: Changes in habitat will cause change in populations
- Flexibility for land managers
- What would be the management impact to PAC treatment, best way to treat PAC towards resiliency? Are those the best ways to manage CSO?
- Assumptions: Managing PACs – is it broad enough to develop
- Development of LiDAR in other forests? Some forests do not have as much data as others
- Recommend better techniques for capturing habitat data
- Priorities: recommend occupancy data form habitat monitoring
- Is habitat trending away for desired conditions?
- People agree we need region wide PACs study to be able to do adaptive management, to be efficient in using resources we have, and to prioritize PACs and monitoring efforts
- How can phased approach be developed into a PAC
- How can different PAC retirement and different lengths be optimal to time window to retire current PAC?

II. Range

Conservation Measures Discussion

- No good way to acknowledge rule of public and private lands in forest service range
- Needs to say Sierra Nevada CSO range and goal
- Territory size - can vary widely
- Are people ok with replacing HRCA?
- Broad agreement to retain the range for ???

Monitoring and Adaptive Management Discussion

- Is restoration possible in entire range?

III. Natural Range of Variability (NRV)

Conservation Measures Discussion

- How do we know that returning to NRV is positive for spotted owl persistence?
- How to maintain 70% canopy cover but NRV range isn't current
- Recommending phase approach to suit NRVs
 - Looked back at nest site structure and should look into more canopy cover as a significant trait of habitat
 - How do we look into NRV to a smaller scale
 - FRV unlikely to predict NRV
 - What are we maintaining? What are the bench marks?
 - East Sierra doesn't have a lot of PACs delineated
 - Preventing barred owls...
 - How feasible it is to obtain economics
 - Flexibility within the landscape
 - Dynamic system for PAC resistance
 - They provided flexibility early on
- With respect to NRV, managing for 150 years ago doesn't make sense, need to consider current changes in climate and for future climate.
- More details needed on NRV and what it really means, uncertainty associated with it.
- Need for more literature in establishing NRV
- Reducing tree density may not meet goal when meeting NRV goal

Monitoring and Adaptive Management Discussion

- Assumption: Managing for NRV is desirable or even possible for us to do
- How do owls respond to NRV?
- What is food supply? Assumption NRV will solve everything for confounding factors against CSO viability
- Changing the trajectory of NRV will change habitat resiliency
- We need more information on areas that align with NRV, changes in climate of owls that move into higher elevation forests
- Do owls use similar habitat as in NRV?
- Does NRV represent highest quality habitat? With the following factors taken into consideration:
 1. Habitat quality
 2. Species
 3. Threats
- More plasticity in concepts around component of NRV

IV. Population

Conservation Measures Discussion

- Regarding desired population of CSO: do we need more habitat or better understanding of population data to make a better population strategy

Monitoring and Adaptive Management Discussion

- Assumption: Demography studies are representative of population over entire range
- Assumption: Influence populations as managers
- What is a viable population?
- Occupancy modeling, CSO reproduction, prey response
- Can CSO persist in changing climate?
- Do restoration efforts persist over change in time?
- Flexibility needs to be included when considering increase in population of owls
- Understand what current population is, what is habitat success, and if NRV can just protect PACs
- How do we get to stable population if we don't know what a stable population is?
- Factors influencing new occupancy
- Why have we not seen rebound from 1992 CASPO?
- What remains to be learned in population declines from Sequoia/Kings Canyon to incorporate into strategy?

V. Prey

Conservation Measures Discussion

- Prey – more specific to species, elevation

Monitoring and Adaptive Management Discussion

- Assumption that changes in habitat equal to increase to prey availability
- Prey constant in time and space, everything is NRV appropriate

VI. Disturbances/Threats

Conservation Measures Discussion

- More specificity needed in what environmental disturbances are:
 1. What is a bad environmental disturbance?
 2. It is critical to the habitat itself?
- Bark beetle causing high tree mortality. How will we manage for the owl given loss of canopy and a significant portion of trees
- Need to have realistic views in dealing with treatments to avoid disturbance
- Minimizing habitat may lose required disturbance
- Goal #1- Barred owl management
- Wasn't clear on information on resiliencies

Monitoring and Adaptive Management Discussion

- Can we control future disturbances?

- Are the emerging threats greater than historical threats to CSO?

VII. Fires/Burns

Conservation Measures Discussion

- Limitations
 1. Prescribed burning
 2. Are there any burn buffers?
- Bringing prescribed fire back
- Strong need to more restored fire treatments, lack of discussion of how it will be accomplished
- Manage wildfire, plan is not only about mechanical thinning
- Fire resiliency or lack of disturbance - may not be able to have both

Monitoring and Adaptive Management Discussion

- Fire only vs fire + mechanical treatments in thinning strategies
- King fire exacerbated declines in CSO population

VIII. Implementation & Management

Conservation Measures Discussion

- How would it work with state agencies?
- Restoration approach and identifying standards to work within
- Hierarchy of goals in order to realistically implement
- Hierarchy in management in respect to owls occupying PACs that are more productive, protocol in maintaining high occupancy PACs
- Strategy results in prioritization and how and where implemented in hierarchy
- Significant changes shouldn't be related to management practices
- Be more explicit on management scale, high canopy, don't have best science to make it feasible
- Some management would be restricted with programmatic agreement
- Management goals could be more specific
- Some management strategies don't meet what's happening on east side - different areas require different adjustments

Monitoring and Adaptive Management Discussion

- Create strategies in a timely fashion
- Set criteria for things causing negatives effects
- Identify trigger and responses (triggers for treatment and triggers for chain response plan), based on strategies for population levels
- Triggers and threshold for when we would want to contemplate change in management
- Whatever monitoring you develop, what is the cause of mechanical treatment and owl decline?
- Feeling that we lack integration that feeds back into adaptive management
- Key components of trust, effective communication with researchers and maintenance of open discussion could help with adaptive management framework
- Identify what the trigger points are for changing strategy
- What level of precision do you want for monitoring?

- How does management activity affect owls?
- Trigger points and treatment monitoring
- Can we answer questions in time in length of monitoring and conditions of trends?
- Maintain monitoring in Sequoia Kings Canyon, because maybe if the CSO population declines there we can base assumptions off them
- Phased strategy where we reach threshold of 3-5 years and after period of time where management PAC protection status is changed and not removed to prioritize certain habitat elements for CSO to recolonized
- Need more information on metrics, timeframe, and discrete areas in the Sierra Nevada

IX. Funding & Resources

Conservation Measures Discussion

- How to get funds, how they would be allocated, and how funding would get into restoration act?
- Lack of funding and forest service staff has made progress slow in conservation strategy

Monitoring and Adaptive Management Discussion

- Assumption: Have all the resources to do all this

X. Improve Definitions

Conservation Measures Discussion

- Looking for better definitions for:
 1. High quality foraging habitat
 2. Criteria
 3. Alter disturbance regimes
- Some definitions needs clarification:
 1. active restoration
 2. Sub stand landscape,
 3. Resiliency
 4. Alternative disturbance
- In regard to PACs
 - How do we define what suitable habitat is?
 - Habitat manipulated within suitable habitat - not really defined
 - What does the term "recruit" mean
- Clusters clumps and gap – define it and put metrics to those terms, more specificity

Monitoring and Adaptive Management Discussion

- What does stability mean?

XI. Miscellaneous

Conservation Measures Discussion

- Expediently restoration B8 – need more info

Monitoring and Adaptive Management Discussion

- Should key components be included?
- Plan to understand what current conditions are out there from current baseline

XII. Process Considerations

Conservation Measures Discussion

- Need more prep work on tasks before coming into conservation strategy workshop so participants can be better prepared to contribute

Next Steps

The Forest Service will review all comments collected at the Public Meeting and use this input to inform the next iteration of the Conservation Strategy. Three sets of additional comments were received following the meeting and these will be considered as well.

There were questions about how draft proposed conservation measures differ from current USFS management. A 'crosswalk' between current and proposed directions is being developed and will be posted on the website once completed.

There was also interest from participants in learning more about the natural range of variation (NRV). While NRV assessments for most of the major Sierra Nevada habitat types are up on the web (<http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r5/plants-animals/?cid=stelprdb5434436>), the most relevant assessment, that for the Yellow Pine/Mixed Conifer habitats in which the CSO largely reside, has been temporarily removed from the website while it undergoes the publication process. We will get it posted again to the web as soon as we are able.

When completed, the revised California Spotted Owl Conservation Strategy will be available for review. Between now and then, if it appears that there is a need for another public forum, face-to-face, or virtual, all invitees to the September meeting will be informed.