

hormones in field collected northern spotted owl feces, and found those levels to be significantly higher in males having territories centered within 0.41 km (0.25 mi) of roads or areas of recent timber harvest. Gutiérrez and Tempel (*in litt.* 2002) collected similar data on California spotted owls. They found significant variation between samples, but that variation was not significantly correlated with habitat condition, road proximity, or exposure to noise from chainsaws.

Barred Owl Invasion. Historically, the barred owl was native to eastern north America and absent from the range of the California spotted owl. Barred owls have expanded their range into western North America, moving into the range of the California spotted owl from the north. Barred owl populations in California are increasing, especially in northwestern California, and the species has now been detected as far south as Nevada County, California, in the Sierra Nevada (Dark *et al.* 1998).

Barred owls have been documented to displace spotted owls from their territories and to hybridize with spotted owls (Dark *et al.* 1998). There is also circumstantial evidence that barred owls will prey on spotted owls (Leskiw and Gutiérrez 1998).

The barred owl invasion of western North America has probably been facilitated by alteration of habitats by humans. The barred owl is a forest species, but does not rely on late successional forests as spotted owls do. The establishment of riparian forests and the planting of trees that occurred simultaneously with human settlement of the northern great plains may have created habitat used by dispersing barred owls as they moved west across the midwestern United States and southern Canada. Barred owls readily use disturbed habitats, and logging in the Rocky Mountains, Cascades, and Sierra Nevada has probably facilitated their colonization of forests there.

In 2002, researchers on the Lassen Study Area found three pairs with combinations of spotted owls and "sparred owls" (spotted owl/barred owl hybrids), and one pair of barred owls. None of these birds reproduced. No other barred owls or sparred owl combinations were reported from the Sierra Study Area or the Sequoia Study Area. Other reports had not yet been received as of late October 2002 (Stine 2002).

The existing population of barred owls in the Sierra Nevada remains at a level below one percent that of spotted owls. Although barred owls may pose a substantial threat to California spotted owls at some point in the future, by

themselves, or in combination with other factors, they do not nor do other factors seem to pose now or in the foreseeable future a significant threat to the continued existence of the California spotted owl such that it warrants listing.

Finding

We have carefully assessed the best scientific and commercial information available regarding the past, present, and future threats faced by this species. We reviewed the petition, information available in our files, other published and unpublished information submitted to us during the public comment period following our 90-day petition finding, and consulted with recognized California spotted owl experts and other Federal and State resource agencies. On the basis of the best scientific and commercial information available, we find that listing the California spotted owl is not warranted at this time.

In making this finding, we recognize that there are indications that the California spotted owl may be experiencing an uncertain levels of decline in parts of its range based on demographic studies, and that the species may face threats from catastrophic fire and habitat modification related to reduction of the risk of catastrophic fire. We recognize the difficult trade-offs involving short-term risk of fuel treatments versus long term benefits of those treatments in reducing risks and improving habitat. We recognize other current threats to the species, its habitat, and its prey, including effects of drought and climate change on habitat; the potential spread of a new competitor/predator (the barred owl); and possible threats of disease.

We conclude that the overall magnitude of threats to the California spotted owl does not rise to the level that requires the protections of the Act. We will continue to monitor the status and management of the species. We will continue to accept additional information and comments from all concerned governmental agencies, the scientific community, industry, or any other interested party concerning this finding.

References Cited

A complete list of all references cited is available on request from the Sacramento Fish and Wildlife Office (see **ADDRESSES** above).

Author

The primary authors of this document are Phil Detrich of the Yreka Fish Wildlife Office, Kenneth Sanchez of the Sacramento Fish and Wildlife Office,

and Darrin Thome of the Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office (see **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT**).

Authority

The authority for this action is the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (16 U.S.C. 1531 *et seq.*).

Dated: February 7, 2003.

Steve Williams,

Director, Fish and Wildlife Service.

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DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Fish and Wildlife Service

Aquatic Nuisance Species Task Force Gulf of Mexico Regional Panel Meeting

AGENCY: Fish and Wildlife Service, Interior.

ACTION: Notice of meeting.

SUMMARY: This notice announces a meeting of the Aquatic Nuisance Species (ANS) Task Force Gulf of Mexico Regional Panel. The meeting topics are identified in the **SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION**.

DATES: The Gulf of Mexico Regional Panel will meet from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Wednesday, February 26, 2003, and 8:30 a.m. to noon, on Thursday, February 27, 2003.

ADDRESSES: The Gulf of Mexico Regional Panel meeting will be held at the Springhill Suites, 24 Via De Luna, Pensacola Beach, Florida 32561. Phone 850-932-6000.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Ron Lukens, Assistant Director, Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission at 228-875-5912 or Sharon Gross, Executive Secretary, Aquatic Nuisance Species Task Force at 703-358-2308.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: Pursuant to section 10(a)(2) of the Federal Advisory Committee Act (5 U.S.C. App. I), this notice announces meetings of the Aquatic Nuisance Species Task Force Gulf of Mexico Regional Panel. The Task Force was established by the Nonindigenous Aquatic Nuisance Prevention and Control Act of 1990.

The Gulf of Mexico Regional Panel was established under the auspices of the ANS Task Force in 2000 with administration and coordination provided by the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission. The purpose of the Panel is to advise and make recommendations to the Aquatic Nuisance Species Task Force on issues relating to the Gulf of Mexico region of the United States that includes five Gulf