

Forest Ecosystem Management in the Pacific Northwest: A New Approach

By Edward E. Starkey

Research Biologist,

Cooperative Park Studies Unit, Oregon State University

On April 2, 1993, President Clinton held a Forest Conference in Portland, OR to address the existing forest management gridlock in the Pacific Northwest. For at least the last 20 years, management of federal forests in the region has been at the center of intense controversy. With the listing of the northern spotted owl as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, the debate moved to the courts. Currently, timber cutting on Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management lands within the range of the northern spotted owl has been essentially brought to a halt by federal court orders.

Following the Forest Conference, President Clinton created The Forest Ecosystem Management Assessment Team and two other working groups dealing with agency coordination and labor and community assistance. In his opening remarks, President Clinton stated the fundamental question for these working groups: "How can we achieve a balanced and comprehensive policy that recognizes the importance of the forests and timber to the economy and jobs in this region, and how can we preserve our precious old-growth forests, which are part of our national heritage and that, once destroyed, can never be replaced?"

The Forest Ecosystem Management Assessment Team was asked to identify management alternatives that attain the greatest economic and social contributions from the forests and also meet the requirements of the applicable laws and regulations, including the Endangered Species Act, the National Forest Management Act, the Federal Land Policy Management Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act.

From the beginning of this effort, agencies were explicitly instructed that they would be expected to work together in developing and implementing a regional forest plan. The Forest Ecosystem Management Assessment Team was further instructed to develop alternatives without regard to agency boundaries. Thus, all options were based on ecological conditions and objectives rather than agency jurisdiction.

Ten options were developed and analyzed, and subsequently included in a Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement. These options included various combinations of Late-Successional Forest Reserves, Riparian Reserves, and prescriptions for management inside and outside of reserves.



Most timber cutting would occur outside the reserves. Size of the reserve systems varied from 4.2 to 11.5 million acres.

For all options, the team evaluated the likelihood of maintaining well-distributed habitat for populations of threatened marbled murrelets and northern spotted owls. Additionally, for seven of the options, similar assessments were completed for more than 1,000 plant and animal species that are closely associated with late-successional forests. The likelihood of maintaining connected, viable late-successional ecosystems was also evaluated. Likelihoods varied by option, but were generally related to the amount of late-successional forest included within reserve systems. Similar assessments were conducted for at-risk fish species and stocks, and these ratings were sensitive to degree of stream-side/watershed protection provided. Collectively these assessments probably represent the most extensive evaluation of biological risk ever undertaken to assist decision-makers in determining the degree to which an array of options might meet legal requirements.

Timber harvests under any of the options would be significantly less than levels of 1980-1989 (4.6 billion board feet per year), and ranged from 0.2 billion board feet per year to 1.8 billion board feet per year. A number of local communities would be seriously impacted by any of the options.

On July 1, President Clinton announced his selection of "Option 9" as the preferred alternative. This option includes approxi-

mately 7 million acres of congressionally reserved areas (e.g., national parks and wilderness areas), 7 million acres of Late-Successional Reserves, 2.2 million acres of Riparian Reserves, 1.7 million acres of lands administratively withdrawn from timber harvest, and 4.9 million acres which would continue to be available for timber production and cutting. Approximately 1.2 billion board feet of timber could be cut each year under this option.

National parks represent approximately two million acres of the congressionally reserved areas included within Option 9. Although most national parks of the Pacific Northwest contain significant areas that are above tree line, these parks also contain invaluable stands of late-successional forests. For example, Olympic NP contains nearly all of the remaining uncut forest on the Olympic Peninsula, and is the cornerstone of any conservation strategy for the peninsula. Mt. Rainier, North Cascades, and Crater Lake NPs, along with adjacent U. S. Forest Service lands, also are integral components of Option 9. Redwoods NP contains the only significant federal forests on the north coast of California.

Implementation of Option 9 would significantly affect national parks and their management. Most importantly, the area of protected ecosystems in the vicinity of most parks would be greatly increased. Increased protection for Olympic NP is especially significant. The park and several small Wilderness Areas managed by the USFS contain approximately 960,000 acres. Under Option 9, an additional 500,000 acres of adjacent federal lands would be managed as a Late-Successional Reserve. Thus the effective size of the protected ecosystem would increase by more than 50 percent. However, because of past timber cutting, less than one-half of this additional area presently contains forests with late-successional characteristics. Therefore, it will be many decades before the Late-Successional Reserve becomes fully functional.

Significant additional protection is also provided for North Cascades and Mt. Rainier NPs, where nearly all adjacent federal lands would be managed as Late-Successional Reserves. Late-Successional Reserves would be established along portions of the eastern

Continued on page 25

and southwestern boundaries of Crater Lake, providing somewhat less protection than for the Washington parks.

Option 9 also provides increased opportunities for park managers to participate in regional land management planning. Regional coordinating groups may be established which would include park managers. Permanent technical support groups, with staff from all appropriate agencies, would carry out day-to-day activities, including coordination of monitoring, data information management, and sharing of information.

The team recommended that "federal agencies through the interagency coordination effort, should develop a multi-organizational resource monitoring system. Standards and guidelines that address design and quality control should be included." and "federal agencies in collaboration with public and private interests ..., should develop a research plan for the Pacific Northwest." As inventory and monitoring (I&M) programs are developed for national parks of the Pacific Northwest, park managers have an opportunity to contribute information which may be required to measure the effectiveness of the regional conservation strategy. Hopefully, this will be reflected in increased interagency cooperation and integration of I & M and research plans.

The scientific input to the process was essentially completed when President Clinton selected Option 9 as the preferred alternative. Now, policy-makers, the courts, and the public must decide whether the plan will be implemented. During the summer and fall, the plan will undergo judicial review to determine whether the current injunction on timber cutting can be removed or modified. Also, public and agency comments will be sought, as required by the National Environmental Policy Act.

Copies of both the *Draft Supplemental EIS on Management of Habitat for Late-Successional and Old-Growth Forest Related Species Within the Range of the Northern Spotted-Owl and Forest Ecosystem Management: An Ecological, Economic and Social Assessment*, the Report of the Forest Ecosystem Management Assessment Team, are available from the Interagency SEIS Team, P.O. Box 3623, Portland, Oregon, 97208-3623 (503-326-7883).

The comment period on the SEIS ends Oct. 28, 1993, but allows plenty of review time. Each document is several hundred pages in length.

Dr. Starkey served as a member of the Forest Ecosystem Management Assessment Team, as well as the Recovery Team for the Northern Spotted Owl.