

Fish and Wildlife Service Hatches Unworkable, Inhumane, Wasteful Plan to Slaughter Barred Owls

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) has, through a **Record of Decision** in September 2024, announced it will proceed with a “**Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Barred Owl Management Strategy**” (FEIS) to orchestrate the killing of more than **450,000 barred owls** in the Pacific Northwest as a Hail Mary pass to reduce competitive pressures affecting perhaps 4,000 Northern and California spotted owls. In short, there will be more than 100 barred owls killed for every living spotted owl, even though they are close cousins and look-alike species.

In November 2024, Animal Wellness Action and the Center for a Humane Economy **filed a lawsuit** in U.S. District Court to block the overreaching and unworkable plan targeting a species protected for a century by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. The organizations have rallied more than **240 organizations** to oppose the plan, including more than 20 local Audubon societies.

- **The plan is by far the largest-ever raptor killing program instituted by any nation.** Moral concerns about safeguarding raptors compelled Congress to enact the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. This plan would kill annually 1,000 times more raptors than any prior plan worldwide.
- **Barred owls are a range-expanding North American native species, protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.** Range expansion is a naturally occurring ecological phenomenon, and it is a core characteristic of many species of birds and mammals, including barred owls. Especially in an era of climate change, we cannot punish species that adapt to opportunity or changes in the environment caused by humans. According to one study, a total of 111 other native, North American bird species have engaged in recent range expansions, with 14 of them into more states or provinces than barred owls have.
- **The plan calls for allowing owl hunting in 14 units of the National Park Service.** The protection of wildlife in national parks and monuments is a core value of the National Park Service. Opening hunting in national parks threatens to instill fear in wildlife,



thereby diminishing the wildlife-watching experiences for tens of millions of visitors who trek to these destinations. The change in the visitor experience, along with moral concerns of owl hunting, threaten to decrease visitation and hurt gateway communities who depend on strong attendance. Units to be open to owl killing are Olympic, Mount Rainier, and North Cascades national parks in Washington; Crater Lake National Park and Oregon Caves National Monument and Preserve in Oregon; and, in California, Redwood, Lassen Volcanic, Yosemite, and Kings Canyon & Sequoia national parks, Muir

Woods and Devil's Postpile national monuments, Whiskeytown and Golden Gate national recreation areas, and Point Reyes National Seashore.

- **The plan is doomed to fail because of in-migration from barred owls from surrounding areas.** Spotted owls are habitat specialists, inhabiting only older and old-growth forests. Barred owls, however, are not so picky; they live in the same forests that spotted owls do, but they also live in younger, less-dense forests. Consequently, the distribution of barred owls is much larger than that of spotted owls, and the numbers of barred owls vastly outnumber those of spotted owls in Washington, Oregon, and California. So after killing a pair of barred owls, many other juvenile and adult barred owls in adjacent and nearby forests would be ready to fly in and replace them. FWS estimated that its plan would remove barred owls from 28% of the total range of the spotted owl. So even with this massive kill, they would address barred owl competition in only about one-quarter of the spotted owl's range, and all kill areas would be surrounded by barred owls. It would be a deadly game of Whac-A-Mole that would never end. So this 30-year plan would be just the beginning.
- **FWS has a poor record of wildlife control successes in vast, unbounded areas.** With the "control area" covering 11-24 million acres from Marin County, Calif., to the Canadian border, the FWS is undertaking a program on a scale and timeline that is unprecedented. The agency has not succeeded with any plans to control other species, including invasive species such as wild pigs, Burmese pythons, or nutria, over vast areas and over such a time frame — a time frame that allows the "bounce back" of the targeted species. Birds have a much greater recolonization potential than mammals due to their ability to fly. For example, the average dispersal distance of juvenile barred owls is about 31 miles. The prospect of success of this plan is nil for many reasons: (1) Barred owls are abundant; the barred owl chapter in *Birds of the World* estimates the North American population to be

about 3.5 million. (2) There are no geographical barriers stopping barred owls from moving back into the kill areas; In fact, the lack of barred owls would encourage them to do so. (3) The control area spans across a patchwork of 17 national forests, including immense roadless areas. (4) There is not a sufficient pool of hunters to conduct the kill through volunteer labor, requiring a major federal investment to hire shooters to achieve an enormous kill of the nocturnal birds.

- **The cost of this plan may exceed \$1.35 billion.** In a glaring omission in its FEIS, FWS did not estimate the cost of implementing this plan. But a recent grant by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation now provides a bench-mark cost estimate for the program. The foundation funded a \$4.5 million grant request by the Hoopa Valley Tribe, including members involved in ongoing barred-owl-kill plan, to support a localized plan to shoot up to 1,500 owls. These shooters and trackers are perhaps the most experienced owl hunters in the Pacific Northwest, suggesting an especially high efficiency rate relative to other shooters who might be conscripted for killing the raptors. Taking the total grant cost and applying it to the number of owls to be killed, the expenditure per owl is \$3,000. With this investment-to-cost ratio as a new baseline for an economic analysis, the cost of killing 450,000 owls over 30 years would be \$1.35 billion. This dwarfs the original estimate that the Center for a Humane Economy had come up with, with a lower cost per bird kill, at \$225 million. In short, this new cost estimate puts an extraordinary and unsustainable price tag on the barred owl kill plan. The annual cost would be \$45 million, or more than half of the entire \$82 million FWS endangered species recovery budget that is supposed to protect 1,300 species and subspecies. The grant to the best-known owl-killing group underscores that the FWS talking point that "volunteer" hunters would conduct the shooting program all across the Pacific Northwest is folly. Shooters are being compensated now for the limited amount of killing being conducted, and scaling up the killing will certainly take a proportional amount of financing for it to proceed.