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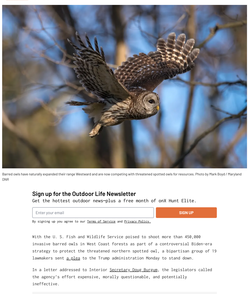
Lawmakers Ask Trump to Stop the $1.3 Billion Plan to Shoot 450,000 Non-Native Barred Owls

A Texas Republican and California Democrat teamed up to challenge the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's controversial plan to kill nearly half a million barred owls in hopes of saving the spotted owl

By Brian Lassiter | Published May 15, 2025 2:15 PM EDT



Barred owls have naturally expanded their range Westward and are now competing with threatened spotted owls for resources. Photo by Mark Boyd / Flickr/Creative Commons

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With the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service poised to shoot more than 450,000 invasive barred owls in West Coast forests as part of a controversial Biden-era strategy to protect the threatened northern spotted owl, a bipartisan group of 19 lawmakers sent a letter to the Trump administration Monday to stand down.

In a letter addressed to Interior Secretary Doug Burgum, the legislators called the strategy's effort expensive, morally questionable, and potentially ineffective.

Troy Nehls, a Texas Republican, and Sydney Kamlager-Dove, a California Democrat, initiated the move, and 17 additional Congress members added their signatures to the rebuke, including nine Democrats and eight Republicans.

"By extrapolating costs for prior kills of owls, conducted on a small scale, this plan would require $1.35 billion over the course of thirty years to hunt and kill one owl species to the benefit of another," the letter stated.

The USFWS lethal culling program would authorize trained shooters from government agencies, private companies, local landowners, and Native American Tribes "to enter discount forces across to kill nearly half a million barred owls."

In essence, each bird would cost U.S. taxpayers $3,000.

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The letter also pointed out that there is little precedent for success in a culling program this extensive. Programs that did have positive outcomes occurred in island ecosystems or other areas with natural barriers, not the 20-acre patchwork of lands proposed in the USFWS plan to protect spotted owls.

Another flaw in the plan is that barred owls are a native North American species protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act for more than 100 years. Although they are not native to West Coast forests, they have expanded their range naturally. The anomalies are native to eastern North America and didn't first appear in the Pacific Northwest until the 1970s.

"To claim that animals are invasive because they expand their range denies dynamism in ecological systems," the letter stated.

One Observer for the barred owl's Westward expansion is that environmental changes caused by European settlement altered the natural landscape, removing natural barriers and providing a corridor for them to reach the spotted owl's natural habitat. Today, barred owls outnumber their spotted cousins in portions of the latter's historic range. Research suggests that declines in spotted owl populations are more pronounced in areas where barred owls have taken up residence.

The USFWS finalized its non-native barred owl management strategies in August 2024 and included the lethal removal of barred owls with non-lethal ammunition after attracting the birds with recorded calls in California, Oregon, and Washington. The agency has not announced a specific launch date for barred owl removal under the new strategy. However, a final proposal is expected to be announced sometime in the spring or summer of 2025.

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Northern spotted owl (left) and barred owl (Photo by Lonnie Hall, Barred owl photo for habitat, food, and other resources. Photo by Kyle Gulbran / Bureau of Land Management)

Killing barred owls for conservation is nothing new. Approximately 4,500 of them have been removed through lethal methods since 2009, according to Nature Brief, the USFWS barred owl strategy leader. However, the culling project would expand significantly under the USFWS's Final Barred Owl Management Strategy.

The USFWS has listed the northern spotted owl as a threatened species in accordance with the Endangered Species Act since 1990. Early efforts to save the bird and its rapidly disappearing old-growth forest habitat included the timber industry in the early 1990s. The checkbook-brown spotted owl became a cultural symbol of environmental conflict.

Conservationists argued that protecting old-growth forests was crucial to the spotted owl's survival as a species, while the timber industry contended that restrictions threatened jobs and local economies. The drama surrounding the bird's struggle for survival pitted against the timber industry resulted in protesters forming human blockades and chaining themselves to logging equipment.

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The press coverage the protesters garnered for the little spotted owl helped usher in Bill Clinton's Northwest Forest Plan. Initiated in 1993, the plan aimed to balance economic needs with environmental protection, significantly reducing timber sales on federal lands in the Pacific Northwest. Although Clinton's plan protected most of the spotted owl's older forest habitat and saw a net increase of over 1 million acres of additional habitat in the first decade, spotted owl populations continued to plummet at even greater rates than expected in its northern range.

Alice Jones Webb
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Alice Jones Webb is a staff writer for Outdoor Life, covering everything from breaking news to in-depth gear reviews. She lives in rural North Carolina with her non-hunting husband, a codependent dog, and a well-stocked chest freezer.
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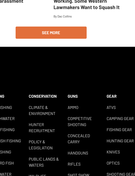

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SUMMARY
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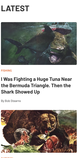
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