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Final TWS Position Statement

Recognition of Wildlife Needs in Forest Management

Forests are dynamic ecosystems that undergo periodic renewal by natural disturbance agents such as fire, wind, insects, snow, avalanches, frost, drought, and native herbivores. The effects often include immediate changes in the structure and composition of plant communities, and more gradual change through processes of succession. Processes of change also occur in response to forest-management activities. Whether induced by natural events or management, such changes have immediate and long-term effects on wildlife habitat. Managing forests for wildlife habitat objectives requires understanding of natural disturbance ecology and of habitat relationships, and application of that knowledge in forest management prescriptions that create favorable habitat conditions for the wildlife species of interest or that maintain the diversity of biological components and processes. Wildlife in North America are public trust resources valued by people for a broad suite of cultural, social, economic, and spiritual benefits, and therefore management of the forests for wildlife habitat objectives is important to society.

For any species, the positive effects of management may be emphasized and the negative effects minimized by integrating wildlife needs and habitat relationships into forest management plans and management prescriptions. Specifying desired habitat conditions such as tree species composition, age class distribution, stand density and structure, snags and coarse woody debris, and the size, shape, and juxtaposition of stands is essential for creating immediate and long-term conditions to sustain populations and communities of wildlife. Both silvicultural and wildlife habitat objectives may be met through the close cooperation of forestry professionals and wildlife specialists.

Across the United States, four major trends affect the current and future supply of wildlife habitat on forestlands:

Forestland conversion. As land values and property taxes rise, many private forests across the U.S. are sold and converted to other land uses. According to the Natural Resources Conservation Service, from 1982 to 1987 the net rate of conversion of private forestland to development averaged 426,000 acres per year. This rate increased to 795,000 per year during 1992-1997, and continues to accelerate. Conversion of forestland to commercial and residential development results in the permanent loss of those areas as habitat for forest wildlife. Additional impacts follow as adjacent parcels are sold and developed. As these changes proceed, extensive areas of forest habitat become reduced, fragmented, and degraded with diminished capacity to support wildlife and biological diversity.

Fire-related threats and losses. Decades of management under fire-exclusion policies have wrought significant change in the condition of public forestlands in the U.S. In 2002, a Rocky

Mountain Research Station Technical Report showed that across all forest types, only 33% of National Forest System lands are within their historic range of vegetation composition, structure, and fuels accumulation. Forests "moderately altered from their historic range" prevail on 41% of National Forest lands, with remaining forestlands (26%) "significantly altered from the normal range." This situation has major implications for wildlife and habitats. The National Forests have a vital role in providing wildlife habitat, including refugia for 26% of all imperiled U.S. species.

Four fire-related concerns are prominent. First is the impaired ecological condition of forest ecosystems in which composition, structure, and processes are outside their historic range of variation. Second is the risk of uncontrollable and catastrophic wildfires that have potential to destroy or modify habitats over large areas, and may also threaten the existence of wildlife populations at risk. Third is the need to integrate wildlife objectives and habitat relationships into agency efforts to aggressively manage fuels on the public forests. And fourth is the need to integrate wildlife objectives and habitat relationships into burned-area restoration programs.

Successional stage representation. Old Growth forests are characterized by structural conditions, ecological processes, and micro-environments that may require very long periods to develop. Their importance in wildlife conservation and management derives from the diverse and specialized habitat conditions provided, the dependence of many wildlife species on these habitats, and the fact that old growth forests are depleted in many regions because of past logging. The most extensive tracts of old growth coastal forests in the Pacific Northwest occur on public lands.

Today, most old growth forests on the public lands in the contiguous 48 states are off-limits to active forest management. Such protections, and better information obtained through research and inventories, have improved the management outlook for wildlife that require old growth habitat conditions. Agencies have implemented restoration programs to accelerate the development of stands with old growth habitat characteristics; however, many decades will be required to reverse the depleted status of this component in some forest types.

Conversely, reduced forest harvesting in the past 10-15 years has lowered the representation of early-successional stages in some forest types to below-historical levels. Particularly in southern and eastern forests, the shift has reduced the availability and condition of habitats for early-successional wildlife such as woodcock, ruffed grouse, and prairie warblers. In these situations, a well-balanced program of vegetation-management activities is required to maintain the mix of successional stages and vegetation conditions that provides for the full diversity of habitats and species.

Forest Certification. Many landowners and forest companies have elected to enroll in programs that certify sustainably managed forests. Such programs include certification standards for environmental protection and for the conservation of biological values such as species diversity and wildlife habitat. Compliance with standards is determined through third-party verification by independent, accredited auditors. The most significant gains have occurred on industrial forestlands although state, tribal, and family forests also participate. The largest program in North America, the Sustainable Forestry Initiative, has enrolled more than 136 million acres of forestland. However, this program does not require a third party audit for all certification

holders; only those wishing to market timber within its chain of custody system must undergo such audits. Certification to the standards of the Forest Stewardship Council, another major program, has been attained on 20.9 million acres in North America.

The policy of The Wildlife Society, in regard to recognizing wildlife needs in forest management, is to:

1. Encourage state and federal agencies, as well as NGOs, to advocate for better land-use planning that creates incentives to limit the conversion of forestlands to developed land.

2. Encourage state and federal agencies, non-profit organizations, and private landowners to fully consider wildlife objectives and habitat relationships in forest planning and management and in strategies and programs for fuels management and burned-area restoration

3. Advocate research on the disturbance ecology and natural range of variation of forest ecosystems, and advocate application of that knowledge adaptively in forest planning and management.

4. Encourage state and federal agencies, as well as NGOs, to advocate for the protection and restoration of old growth forests in areas where past depletion limits the availability and quality of wildlife habitat.

5. Advocate well-balanced and appropriate programs of vegetation-management activities to maintain successional-stage mixes and vegetation conditions that provide for the full diversity of habitats and species.

6. Encourage the close cooperation of forestry, ecology, and wildlife professionals.

7. Encourage the use of Certified Wildlife Biologists in forest planning, management, and certification.

8. Encourage universities to build forest management courses into wildlife curricula, and wildlife courses into forestry curricula.

9. Advocate the enrollment of lands in certification programs for sustainable forest management subject to third party audit.

10. Encourage government wildlife agencies and wildlife educational institutions to educate wildlife students, biologists, managers, foresters, and the general public, on natural disturbance ecology, the value of old growth and early successional habitats, and well-balanced implementation strategies.

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