

SAVING THE THREATENED NORTHERN SPOTTED OWL

Leading old-growth forest scientist Dr. Jerry Franklin of the University of Washington, says the final spotted owl recovery plan released in May represents “a major improvement in scientific credibility over the draft recovery plan” released last year. But he says the plan still falls “well short” of meeting the owl’s need for habitat protection, given the critical status of the bird.

Compared to Clinton’s 1994 Northwest Forest plan, the draft plan recommended up to 38 percent less protection for the owl, and the final plan provides up to 56 percent less protection for the owl.

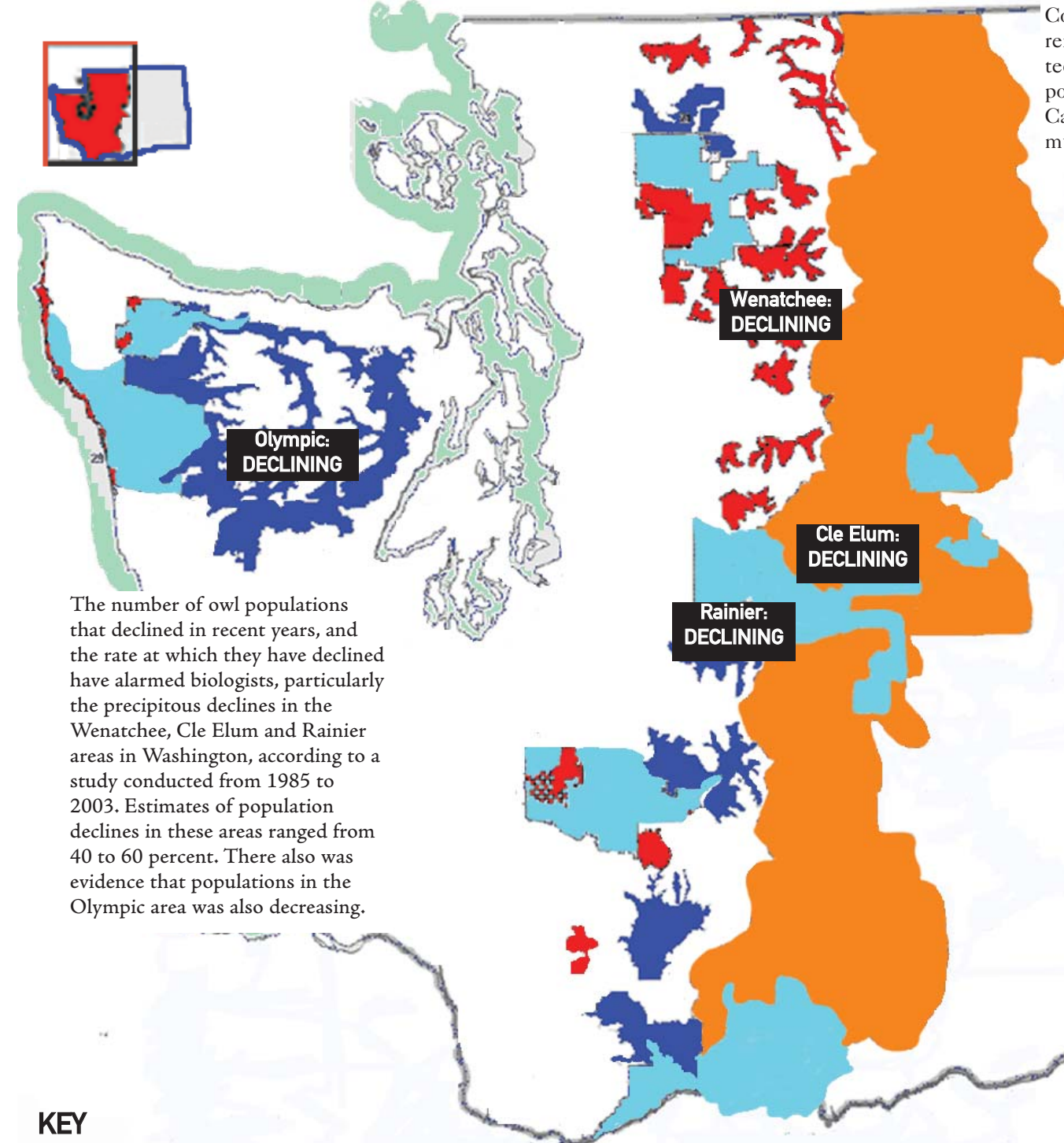
The recovery plan adopts a single species approach, which is a step back from the ecosystem approach of the existing Northwest Forest Plan, developed under President Clinton. His

plan provided more than 10 million acres of Late Successional Reserves and Riparian Reserves. The Clinton Plan is said to have been successful in providing complementary benefits to both terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems.

The timber industry has argued that the owl doesn’t need reserves to survive. The final plan repudiates that point of view, which had been accepted by the draft.

The Bush administration dumped its scientifically flawed draft owl recovery plan, only to replace it with a final plan scientists say is just as flawed

WESTERN WASHINGTON



The number of owl populations that declined in recent years, and the rate at which they have declined have alarmed biologists, particularly the precipitous declines in the Wenatchee, Cle Elum and Rainier areas in Washington, according to a study conducted from 1985 to 2003. Estimates of population declines in these areas ranged from 40 to 60 percent. There also was evidence that populations in the Olympic area was also decreasing.

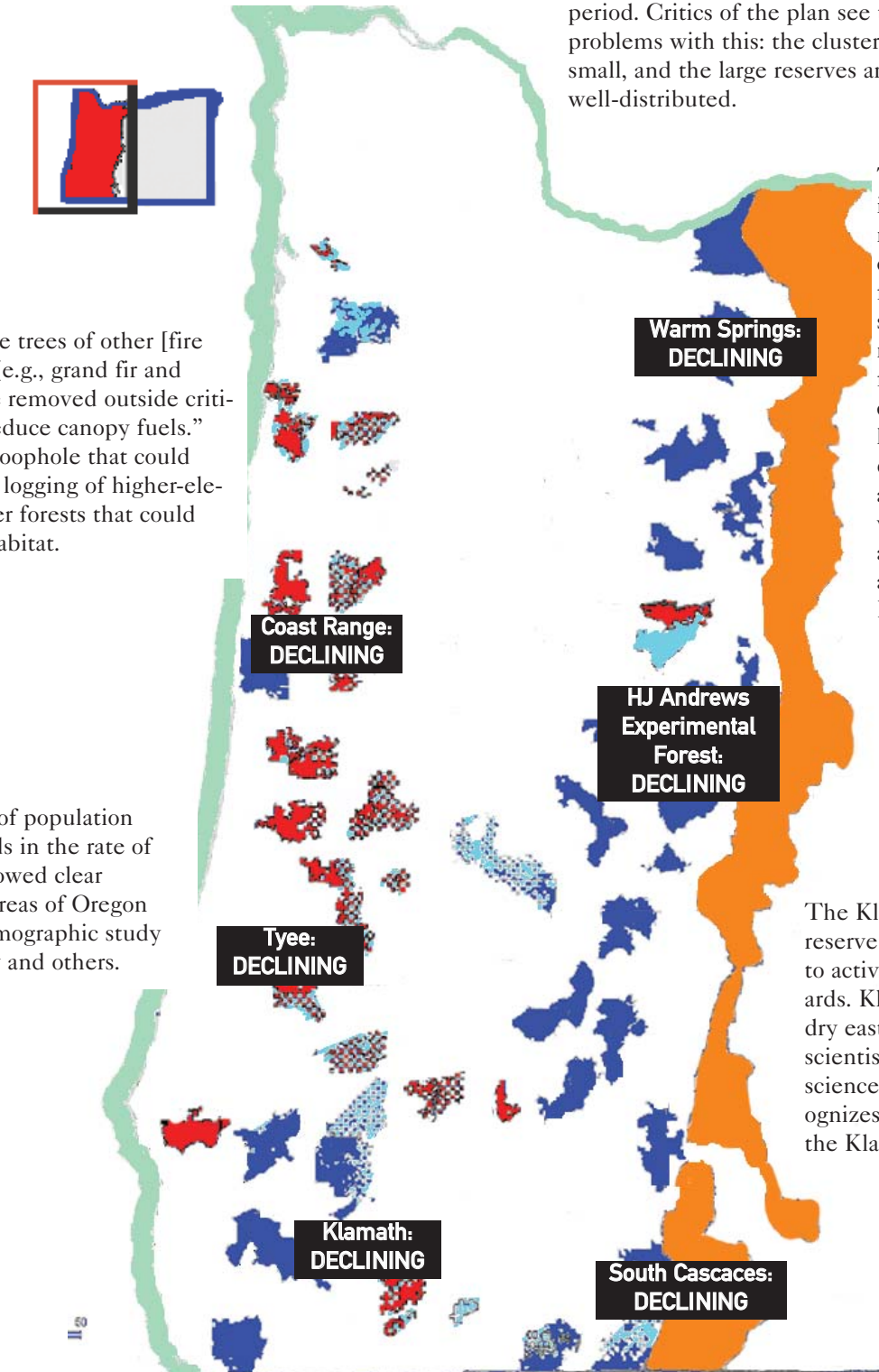
- KEY**
- Areas that can support 20 or more pairs of breeding spotted owls now or in the future (MOCA 1)
 - Areas that can support 1-19 pairs of breeding spotted owls now or in the future (MOCA 2)
 - Areas between or adjacent to MOCAs where lands are expected to support the MOCA network
 - Fire-dominated eastside areas where owl habitat is maintained alongside natural disturbances
- MOCA = Managed Owl Conservation Area

In 2007, officials in British Columbia captured the remaining 16 known wild spotted owls. Before then, the population of spotted owls in Canada was declining by as much as 35 percent per year.

The plan says “large trees of other [fire intolerant] species (e.g., grand fir and white fir) ... may be removed outside critical owl habitat to reduce canopy fuels.” This is a potential loophole that could allow inappropriate logging of higher-elevation mixed-conifer forests that could provide good owl habitat.

The annual rate of population change and trends in the rate of adult survival showed clear decreases in all areas of Oregon included in a demographic study by R.G. Anthony and others.

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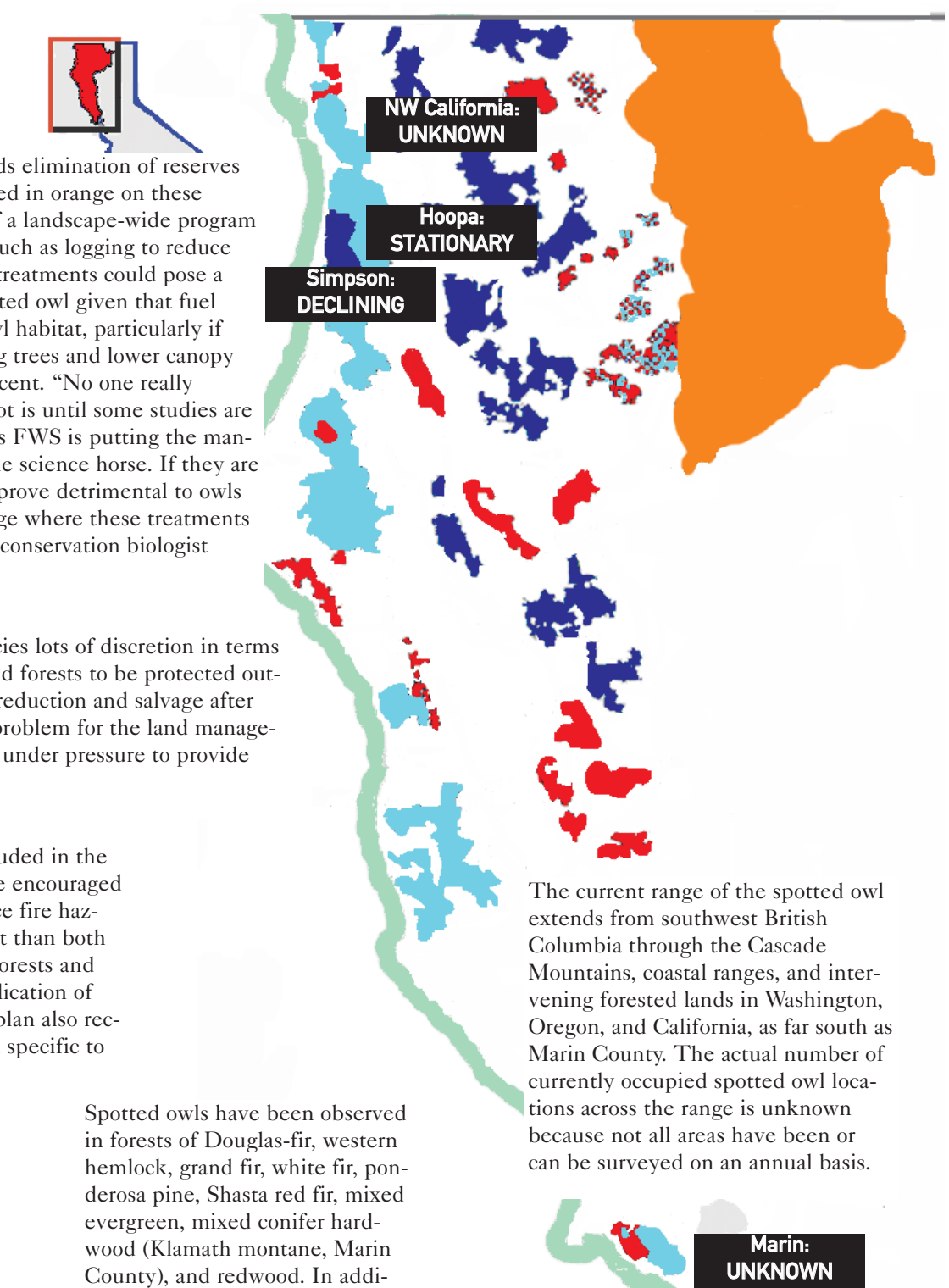
The Recovery Criteria listed in the final plan require clusters of only 15 pairs of owls be maintained in 80 percent of the large reserves (MOCA 1) over a 5 year period. Critics of the plan see two big problems with this: the cluster size is too small, and the large reserves are not well-distributed.

The final plan recommends elimination of reserves in all eastside areas (marked in orange on these maps) and the adoption of a landscape-wide program of “active management” such as logging to reduce fuels in those areas. Fuel treatments could pose a significant risk to the spotted owl given that fuel reduction may degrade owl habitat, particularly if fuel reductions remove big trees and lower canopy closure to less than 60 percent. “No one really knows what that sweet spot is until some studies are done. The problem here is FWS is putting the management cart in front of the science horse. If they are wrong, the impacts could prove detrimental to owls across nearly 1/3 of its range where these treatments are being proposed,” says conservation biologist Dominick DellaSala.

The plan gives the agencies lots of discretion in terms of identifying complex old forests to be protected outside of reserves, for fuel reduction and salvage after fires. This is a systemic problem for the land management agencies which are under pressure to provide timber for harvest.

The Klamath Mountains are included in the reserve network but managers are encouraged to actively manage them to reduce fire hazards. Klamath forests are different than both dry eastside and moist westside forests and scientists caution against the application of science from other regions. The plan also recognizes the dearth of information specific to the Klamath region.

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA



Spotted owls have been observed in forests of Douglas-fir, western hemlock, grand fir, white fir, ponderosa pine, Shasta red fir, mixed evergreen, mixed conifer hardwood (Klamath montane, Marin County), and redwood. In addition, spotted owls in Marin County, California use Bishop pine forests and mixed evergreen deciduous hardwood forests.

The current range of the spotted owl extends from southwest British Columbia through the Cascade Mountains, coastal ranges, and intervening forested lands in Washington, Oregon, and California, as far south as Marin County. The actual number of currently occupied spotted owl locations across the range is unknown because not all areas have been or can be surveyed on an annual basis.

Sources:
 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Recovery Plan for the Northern Spotted Owl
 Status and Trends in Demography of Northern Spotted Owls, 1985–2003, R.G. Anthony et. al.
 Unpublished data obtained by D. DellaSala.