

## Wildfire impacts on California spotted owl nesting habitat in the Sierra Nevada

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**Citation:** Stephens, S. L., J. D. Miller, B. M. Collins, M. P. North, J. J. Keane, and S. L. Roberts. 2016. Wildfire impacts on California spotted owl nesting habitat in the Sierra Nevada. *Ecosphere* 7(10):e01478. 10.1002/ecs2.1478

**Abstract.** California spotted owls (CSOs) (*Strix occidentalis occidentalis*) have received significant conservation attention beginning with the U.S. Forest Service interim management guidelines in 1992. The most commonly reported forest habitat feature for successful nesting habitat of CSO is canopy cover >70%. Loss and degradation of Sierra Nevada CSO habitat, however, has been a growing concern, initially from commercial tree harvesting and, more recently, from wildfire. This study examined trends in wildfire impacts on potential nesting habitat of the CSO and discusses different management approaches that might lead to the conservation of CSO in fire-dependent forests. A total of 85,046 ha of CSO potential nesting habitat was burned by fire that resulted in ≥ 50% tree basal area (BA) mortality, reducing canopy cover on average to <25%, during 2000–2014; this included 2.7%, 12.3%, and 7.6% of dense red fir (*Abies magnifica*), eastside pine, and westside forests, respectively. Based on regression predictions, within the next 75 yr, the cumulative amount of nesting habitat burned at ≥ 50% tree basal area mortality will exceed the total existing habitat. Four management strategies are discussed that could enhance the conservation of the CSO: (1) increased fire suppression, (2) strategically reducing fire hazards using mechanical treatments and/or prescribed fire, (3) increasing the amount of managed wildfire in CSO habitat, and (4) developing a landscape strategy that uses historical forest structure information to identify areas where high-canopy cover forests are more sustainable. Our estimates of how moderate- and high-severity fire may affect forests into the future pose a substantial threat to CSO persistence. More comprehensive forest restoration activities may be needed in CSO habitat to avoid significant losses of older forests.

**Key words:** coarse filter; conservation; fine-filter; Jeffrey pine; mixed conifer forests; ponderosa pine; prescribed fire; restoration; wildfire.

**Received** 24 November 2015; revised 10 June 2016; accepted 21 June 2016. Corresponding Editor: F. Biondi.

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### INTRODUCTION

The California spotted owl (CSO) (*Strix occidentalis occidentalis*) has been a species of concern in the Sierra Nevada for decades due to its association with high-canopy cover forests dominated by large trees (Bias and Gutiérrez 1992, Verner

et al. 1992). The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) has implemented and amended several management guidelines to retain and promote the development of key habitat features for the CSO (Verner et al. 1992, USDA-FS 2001, 2004). A commonly reported forest habitat feature for successful nesting habitat of CSO is forest canopy cover

>70% (North et al. 2000, Phillips et al. 2010), which has recently been suggested to be limiting owl populations in several areas (Tempel et al. 2014a, 2015). In response to recent concerns over potentially declining CSO populations (Conner et al. 2013, Tempel et al. 2014b), the USFS is considering expanding current requirements for high-canopy cover forest habitat. However, this potential expansion may conflict with large-scale forest restoration efforts (Burnett and Roberts 2015) which are guided by historical reconstructions. Recent landscape-level forest reconstructions in the Sierra Nevada demonstrated much lower overall canopy cover in pine-dominated, mixed conifer forests before fire suppression and harvesting became common practices (Scholl and Taylor 2010, Collins et al. 2015, Stephens et al. 2015).

Historical fire regimes in the majority of CSO habitat have been characterized by fires burning at low-moderate intensity at intervals of 5–20 yr (Skinner and Chang 1996, Stephens and Collins 2004, Taylor and Beaty 2005, Scholl and Taylor 2010), although some relatively small high-severity patches historically occurred in these forests (Stephens et al. 2015). However, a century of fire exclusion and forest harvesting has disrupted historical fire regimes and led to increases in the frequency of large fires (Westerling et al. 2006, Dennison et al. 2014), as well as increased area burned by high-severity fire (Miller et al. 2009b, Miller and Safford 2012, Mallek et al. 2013). Climate change is anticipated to further increase fire activity in the Sierra Nevada (Westerling and Bryant 2008, Liu et al. 2013), and this could substantially impact CSO nesting habitat.

Initial concern for the habitat of the CSO was related to forest harvesting practices primarily on USFS lands (Verner et al. 1992), but more recently the impacts of wildfire on its habitat are being examined (Tempel et al. 2015). Although some wildlife species are adapted to high-severity fire (Fontaine and Kennedy 2012), other species, particularly those associated with old-forest characteristics, may be negatively impacted by changes in vegetation structure and composition resulting from large patches of high-severity fire (Roberts et al. 2015, Tempel et al. 2015, Jones et al. 2016a). In response to current and projected increases in wildfire size and

severity, forest restoration treatments, which include mechanical thinning and prescribed burning, have been recommended across large landscapes (Ager et al. 2007, 2010, 2013, North et al. 2009). Restoration treatments are designed not only to reduce extreme fire behavior, but also to enhance ecosystem resilience and sustainability given likely future climatic and drought conditions (Allen et al. 2002). The USFS is currently developing new plans for each National Forest. In California, the conflict between reducing fuels and stem densities, and providing high-canopy cover, multilayered, large tree nesting habitat is a fundamental management problem by which plans will be evaluated and potentially litigated.

A closely related subspecies, the northern spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis caurina*) (NSO) is federally listed as “threatened” due to habitat loss and fragmentation. Research has documented that the most degraded coniferous forest ecosystems within the NSO’s range are the old-growth forests and landscapes of the dry provinces (Spies et al. 2006). Similar to the CSO, the historical structure and function of dry NSO forests have been extensively altered by fire exclusion, increasing tree densities and canopy cover, and the abundance of large snags and logs that might otherwise have been consumed by frequent burns (Everett et al. 1997, Hagmann et al. 2014, Hessburg et al. 2015). New structural definitions of old-growth forest types are needed that recognize their ecological variability and provide a vision of desired future conditions at multiple spatial and temporal scales (Spies et al. 2006, Kaufmann et al. 2007, Perry et al. 2011, Franklin and Johnson 2012, Hessburg et al. 2015, 2016). Furthermore, these desired conditions should be consistent with the historical fire regimes of the different forest types with which spotted owls are associated (Stephens et al. 2013).

In Yosemite National Park where managers are reintroducing fire to the landscape and re-establishing natural fire regimes, there was no significant difference in CSO site occupancy between sites burned under the natural fire regime (i.e., predominately low- to moderate-severity fires) and unburned or fire-suppressed sites (Roberts et al. 2011). Studies on USFS lands have also reported no effect of mixed-severity fire on CSO site occupancy, fidelity, or reproductive success (Bond et al. 2002, Lee et al. 2012).

Studies are less conclusive regarding the effects of high-severity fire on CSO. Thresholds have been reported where no effects of high-severity fire occurred when 0–50 ha of habitat within 203-ha core areas burned at high-severity fire, with extirpation increasing with rising amounts of habitat burned at high-severity fire above the 50-ha threshold (Lee et al. 2013). While recent studies suggest CSOs are able to occupy sites in some burned landscapes, key uncertainties persist regarding the effects of the amounts and spatial patterns of fire of all severities (particularly high severity) on CSO survival, reproduction, and habitat quality, and on the long-term population density that can be sustained across burned landscapes.

The objectives of this study are to examine trends in wildfire impacts on potential nesting habitat of the CSO. Specifically, we examine three questions: (1) How much potential nesting habitat was significantly burned from 2000 to 2014? (2) How were these impacts distributed between different vegetation/habitat types and U.S. National Forests? (3) Using models based on current trends, how much habitat may be impacted over the next century? Finally, using this information we discuss different management strategies that might reduce these impacts and lead to the conservation of CSO nesting habitat in fire-dependent forests.

### Study area

This study focused on U.S. National Forests within the Sierra Nevada Ecosystem Project (SNEP) area managed under the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment (SNFPA) (Fig. 1) (USDA-FS 2004). The study area not only includes the Sierra Nevada and its foothills but also the Warner Mountains, Modoc Plateau, White Mountains, Inyo Mountains, and portions of the southern Cascades. The climate is Mediterranean, with warm, dry summers and cool, wet winters, in which nearly all precipitation falls between October and April (Minnich 2007). Forest vegetation is diverse, with different dominant species and high variation in density and vertical structure dependent upon past management, topography, fire, soils, and latitude (North et al. 2016).

Our study focused primarily on forest types that comprise CSO habitat within the study area (Table 1, Fig. 1; Mayer and Laudenslayer 1988,

Blakesley et al. 2010). Ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa* Lawson & C. Lawson) forests and woodlands dominate lower elevations (300 m to about 1800 m in the northern study area, and about 1200–2100 m in the southern study area), but various hardwood species including canyon live oak (*Quercus chrysolepis* Liebm.), interior live oak (*Q. wislizenii* A. DC.), and tanoak (*Notholithocarpus densiflorus* [Hook. & Arn.] also occur. At intermediate elevations, mixed conifer forests dominate with three or more codominant conifer species, including various mixtures of ponderosa pine, Jeffrey pine (*P. jeffreyi* Balf.), sugar pine (*P. lambertiana* Douglas), white fir (*Abies concolor* [Gord. & Glend.] Lindl. ex Hildebr.), incense cedar (*Calocedrus decurrens* [Torr.] Florin), and Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii* [Mirb.] Franco), including hardwoods such as California black oak (*Q. kelloggii* Newberry) and canyon live oak. Jeffrey pine-dominated forests occur mostly between 1500 and 2400 m in the northern study area and from 1700 to 2800 m in the southern study area (Barbour and Minnich 2000, Fites-Kaufman et al. 2007). A large area east of the Sierra Nevada crest supports a mixed yellow pine forest codominated by ponderosa and Jeffrey pine, commonly referred to as “east-side pine”. Red fir (*A. magnifica* A. Murray bis)-dominated forests generally occur above mixed conifer (2000–2800 m depending on latitude). The boundary between mixed conifer and red fir forests is an important ecological transition that corresponds with the approximate elevation of freezing in mid-winter storms and the elevation of the deepest winter snowpack (Safford and Van de Water 2014).

## METHODS

### Vegetation

We used the Classification and Assessment with Landsat of Visible Ecological Groupings (CALVEG) data produced by the USFS in California as a measurement of prefire vegetation conditions (forest type, canopy cover, tree size class). Technically, CALVEG is a vegetation classification scheme; however, we follow standard practice and also refer to the vegetation map data as CALVEG (Matyas and Parker 1980, Keeler-Wolf 2007, USDA-FS 2014). In addition to being labeled by CALVEG vegetation types, map

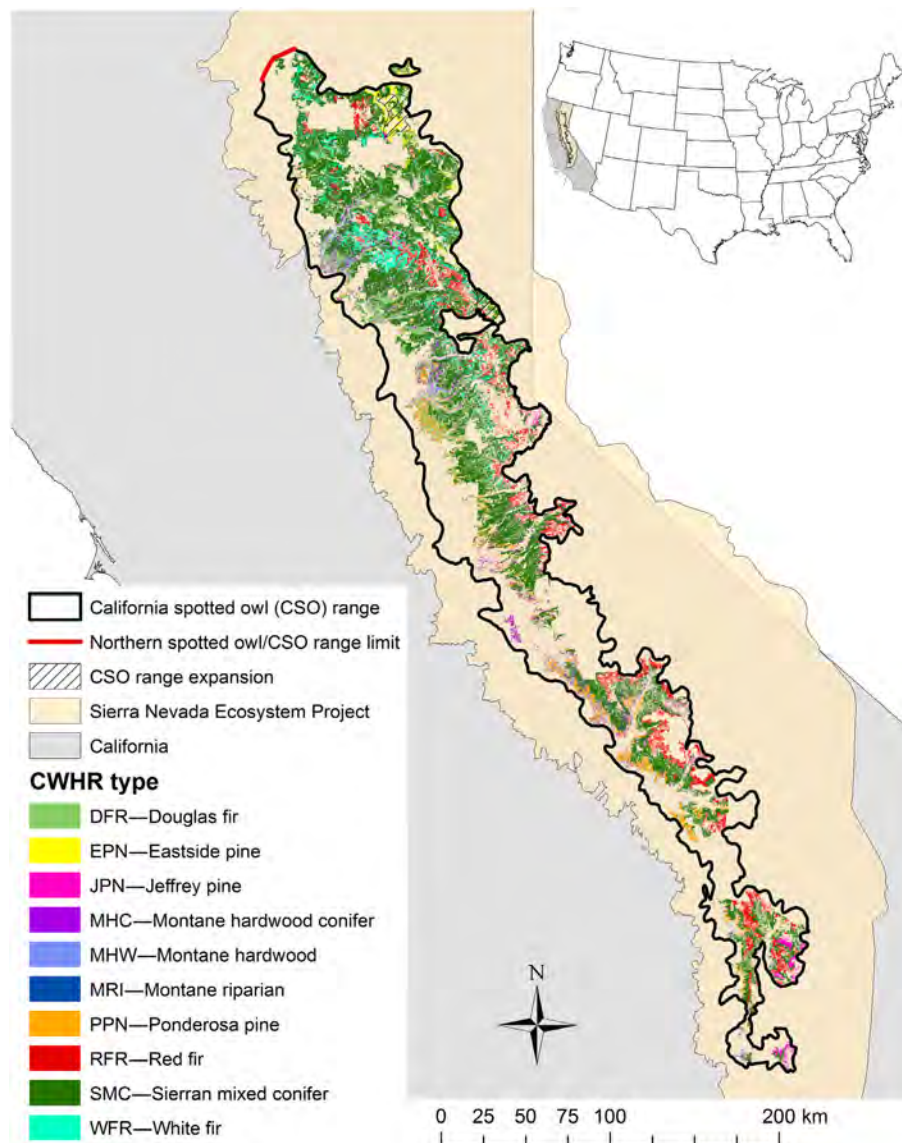


Fig. 1. Study area. Location of the California Wildlife Habitat Relationship (CWHR) vegetation types (Table 1) is only shown within national forest boundaries where tree sizes and canopy cover are considered to be indicative of California spotted owl habitat (CSO); overstory tree sizes are either small, medium/large, or multilayered (4, 5, or 6; Table 3), and canopy cover is moderate or dense (M or D; Table 2). Areas that were added to CSO range are indicated by hatched polygons. The dividing line between the ranges of the northern spotted owl vs. CSO appears in red.

polygons are also labeled with California Wildlife Habitat Relationship (CWHR) vegetation types (Mayer and Laudenslayer 1988). The earliest CALVEG data derived from Landsat Thematic Mapper (TM) satellite data with a minimum mapping unit of 1 ha that included CWHR map labels was published as a CD set in December

2000 (Franklin et al. 2000b, Gordon and Schwind 2000).

CWHR type, size, and density classes have been widely used by U.S. federal wildlife managers to distinguish CSO habitat (e.g., California Spotted Owl Annual Reports 2007–2011, available online at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r5/hfqlg/monitoring/>



Table 1. California Wildlife Habitat Relationship (CWHR) types included in the study.

| Abbreviation | Type                        | Primary ecological zone |
|--------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|
| DFR          | Douglas fir                 | Westside                |
| EPN          | Eastside pine               | Eastside                |
| JPN          | Jeffrey pine                | Eastside                |
| MHC          | Montane<br>hardwood-conifer | Westside                |
| MHW          | Montane hardwood            | Westside                |
| MRI          | Montane riparian            | N/A                     |
| PPN          | Ponderosa pine              | Westside                |
| RFR          | Red fir                     | Upper elevation         |
| SMC          | Sierran mixed conifer       | Westside                |
| WFR          | White fir                   | Westside                |

Note: N/A, not applicable.

resource\_reports/wildlife/; accessed August 2015). Although there are several limitations to the CWHR classification system (Laymon 1989, Purcell et al. 1992, Block et al. 1994, North and Manley 2012), its focus on tree size and canopy cover habitat categories is consistent with the two stand structures most strongly associated with preferred CSO nesting habitat (Verner et al. 1992, Tempel et al. 2014a, 2015). Although limited to coarse-resolution categorization of habitat classes, the CWHR system does provide an ecologically relevant classification for a species focused on large trees and areas of high canopy cover. In this study, we adhere to common practice and define CSO nesting habitat using CWHR canopy cover classes M and D (Table 2) and tree size classes 4, 5, and 6 (Table 3).

#### CSO habitat range

For identifying CSO range within the study area, we started with a CWHR range map and modified it to reflect the Sierra Nevada population of the CSO subspecies (Fig. 1; Zeiner et al.

Table 2. California Wildlife Habitat Relationship (CWHR) standards for canopy cover.

| CWHR code | Canopy cover class | Vegetation cover (canopy cover) (%) |
|-----------|--------------------|-------------------------------------|
| S         | Sparse             | 10–25                               |
| P         | Open               | 25–40                               |
| M         | Moderate           | 40–60                               |
| D         | Dense              | ≥ 60                                |

1988–1990). First, to separate the California and northern spotted owl subspecies, we divided the map where the neck was the narrowest close to the northwestern boundary of the SNEP area, which is generally consistent with the subspecies boundary suggested between the Pit River and Mount Lassen based on recent genetic analyses (Barrowclough et al. 2011). Second, we slightly expanded the boundaries of the map to include known CSO protected activity centers (PACs) on the eastside of the Lassen and Tahoe National Forests (NF), and the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit. The boundary expansions were limited to areas of dense forest habitat identified using aerial photography because of the known association between these forest conditions and nesting locations (North et al. 2000, Tempel et al. 2015).

#### Fire severity

The fire severity data used in this study came from the database maintained by the USFS Pacific Southwest Region. The database contains fire severity data for most large wildfires since 1984 that have occurred at least partially on USFS lands in California (available online at <http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r5/landmanagement/gis/?cid=STELPRDB5327833>). For the SNEP study area, the database contains wildfires > 80 ha. All

Table 3. California Wildlife Habitat Relationship (CWHR) class standards for tree size.

| CWHR code | Size class   | Conifer crown diameter (m)                                                                                                                                                                                           | Hardwood crown diameter (m) | dbh (cm) |
|-----------|--------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------|
| 1         | Seedling     | N/A                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | N/A                         | < 2.5    |
| 2         | Sapling      | N/A                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | < 4.6                       | 2.5–15   |
| 3         | Pole         | < 3.7                                                                                                                                                                                                                | 4.6–9.1                     | 15–28    |
| 4         | Small        | 3.7–7.3                                                                                                                                                                                                              | 9.1–13.7                    | 28–61    |
| 5         | Medium/large | ≥ 7.3                                                                                                                                                                                                                | ≥ 13.7                      | ≥ 61     |
| 6         | Multilayered | A distinct layer of size class 5 trees over a distinct layer of size class 4 and/or 3 trees, and total tree canopy cover of the layers ≥ 60% (layers must have ≥ 10% canopy cover and distinctive height separation) |                             |          |

Notes: dbh, diameter at breast height; N/A, not applicable.

severity data were derived from calibrations of percentage change in tree basal area (BA) to the relativized difference normalized burn ratio (RdNBR) satellite index calculated from 30 m x 30 m pixel Landsat images (Miller and Thode 2007, Miller et al. 2009a, Miller and Quayle 2015). The RdNBR index was developed to allow inter-fire comparisons of severity by compensating for different prefire vegetation conditions (Miller and Thode 2007). A majority of the RdNBR data used to produce the database was acquired from the Monitoring Trends in Burn Severity (MTBS) (Eidenshink et al. 2007) and Rapid Assessment of Vegetation (RAVG) projects (Miller and Quayle 2015), but the database also contains many fires that were mapped by the USFS Pacific Southwest Region. Before applying the calibrations to create categorical severity data, we applied a focal mean in a 30 m x 30 m pixel (0.81 ha) moving window to the RdNBR index data, which matches the 90 meter diameter of the field plots used to derive the calibrations and reduces the number of single pixel polygons in the database (Miller and Thode 2007, Miller and Quayle 2015). All severity data were converted from raster to polygons using standard geographic information system (GIS) conversion procedures to consolidate individual pixels into homogeneous patches of seven categories of percentage change in tree BA (Table 4).

Forest canopy cover >70% has been found to be most highly related to CSO nesting habitat (North et al. 2000, Phillips et al. 2010, Tempel et al. 2014a, 2015). Therefore, to determine a percentage BA change severity category that would reduce canopy cover below 70%, we examined pre- and postfire canopy cover estimates calculated from 1-yr postfire plot data that

Table 4. Percentage change in tree basal area severity categories.

| Severity category | Change in basal area (%) | RdNBR threshold† |
|-------------------|--------------------------|------------------|
| None              | 0                        | 167              |
| Very low          | >0 < 10                  | 292              |
| Low               | ≥10 < 25                 | 347              |
| Low-moderate      | ≥25 < 50                 | 370              |
| Moderate          | ≥50 < 75                 | 472              |
| Moderate-high     | ≥75 < 90                 | 574              |
| High              | ≥ 90                     | 652              |

† Thresholds only apply to 1-yr postfire images (i.e., extended assessments) (Miller et al. 2009a).

Table 5. Fires within CSO habitat range with pre- and postfire canopy cover estimated from field sampled 1-yr postfire tree mortality data (see Miller et al. [2009a] for field protocols and methods for calculating pre- and postfire canopy cover).

| Year of fire | Fire name        | National Forest |
|--------------|------------------|-----------------|
| 2003         | Albanita         | Sequoia         |
| 2001         | Gap              | Tahoe           |
| 2003         | Kibbie           | Stanislaus      |
| 2002         | McNally          | Sequoia         |
| 2003         | Mountain Complex | Stanislaus      |
| 2004         | Power            | Eldorado        |
| 2001         | Star             | Eldorado        |
| 2001         | Stream           | Plumas          |
| 2003         | Whit             | Stanislaus      |

were acquired in fires within CSO habitat range (Table 5; Miller et al. 2009a). Plot-level pre- and postfire canopy cover of trees prior to the fire and alive after the fire was previously estimated using the Forest Vegetation Simulator (FVS) for the calibration of RdNBR to percentage change in canopy cover and BA (Dixon 2002, Miller et al. 2009a). Trees were assumed to be alive prior to the fire based upon the presence or absence of dead needles as well as bark and wood consumption patterns. FVS uses empirically derived relationships of tree species and diameter at breast height (dbh) to model tree canopies that assume trees are healthy and unaffected by fire or disease. However, fire can modify dbh to canopy architecture relationships by raising crown base height, thereby reducing canopy width.

Because there was no way to modify crown width inside FVS to estimate postfire canopy cover, we applied a crown cover correction factor as a function of the percentage of crown volume scorched based upon plot measurements of tree height, scorch height, and crown base height (for details on the correction factor, see Miller et al. [2009a]). We grouped plots that showed an estimated ≥70% prefire canopy cover into seven categories of percentage change in tree BA as they were mapped in 1-yr postfire severity maps. The mean + 1 SD of postfire canopy cover fell below 70% for severity categories with ≥50% BA mortality (Fig. 2). As a conservative estimate, we therefore used areas that were mapped as experiencing ≥50% BA mortality within fires to identify areas that would severely impact CSO

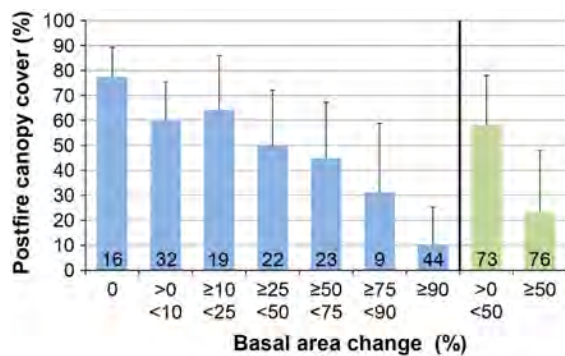


Fig. 2. Mean postfire percent canopy cover by percentage basal area change severity category for plots with estimated prefire canopy cover of  $\geq 70\%$ . Plots are from fires listed in Table 4. Error bars are  $\pm 1$  SD. Labels inside the bottom of the bars are the number of plots. Green bars represent a sum of several smaller categories (blue bars).

nesting habitat. For areas that burned more than once since 1984, we only retained the first time the area burned at  $\geq 50\%$  BA mortality for our analyses.

The range of 50–100% BA mortality covers a broad range of effects which includes what is normally considered moderate severity where only some trees are killed, and high severity where nearly all trees are killed (Lydersen et al. 2016) (Table 4). Within the study area, moderately burned forests often occur in narrow bands around severely burned forests where fire transitions from surface to crown fire (Miller and Quayle 2015). Miller and Quayle (2015) reported that typically 85% of the area  $> 30$  m (one Landsat pixel width) inside areas classified as  $\geq 90\%$  BA mortality in severity maps created from 1-yr postfire images had no surviving trees. As a result, often the majority of area classified as being burned at  $\geq 50\%$  BA mortality category is actually severely burned with few surviving trees. To distinguish between the two types of effects on owl habitat, we assessed area burned at both  $\geq 50\%$  and  $\geq 90\%$  BA mortality.

#### CSO nesting habitat burned 2000–2014

To characterize the amount of CSO nesting habitat burned at  $\geq 50\%$  BA mortality, we focused on the vegetation types that support the majority of owl sites (Table 1). Among the CWHR vegetation types, red fir (RFR) occurs at higher

elevations, and eastside pine (EPN) and Jeffrey pine (JPN) occur more frequently on the eastside of the Sierra Nevada crest, although Jeffrey pine can also occur at higher elevations coincident with red fir (Safford and Stevens, *in press*). All other forest types primarily occur on the westside of the Sierra Nevada crest: Douglas fir (DFR), montane hardwood conifer (MHC), montane hardwood (MHW), ponderosa pine (PPN), Sierra mixed conifer (SMC), and white fir (WFR). To differentiate between different ecological zones, we grouped the CWHR types based upon the three ecological zones in which they primarily occur: eastside, westside, and upper elevation (Table 1). Of the CWHR types we include, montane riparian (MRI) is a minor type that is poorly mapped and we therefore did not assign it to an ecological zone. We report on habitat burned at two different levels of BA reduction ( $\geq 50\%$  and  $\geq 90\%$ ) by tree density and size class, and within each National Forest in the study area.

#### Fire history

We were only able to use fire severity data from 2000 to 2014 because the earliest CALVEG data over the entire study area were last updated in 2000. This 15-yr time series was too short to develop a statistically robust predictive model of area (or proportion of area) containing  $\geq 50\%$  BA mortality alone. Therefore, to obtain a longer fire time series, we used annual area burned scaled by the proportion of  $\geq 50\%$  BA mortality as the predictive variable (see *Methods* below). Mallek et al. (2013) found that there was a high probability that both total annual area burned and annual area burned at high severity increased during 1984–2009 within the SNEP area (probabilities for all forest types  $> 0.86$ ). We therefore expected that annual area burned at  $\geq 50\%$  BA mortality would show a strong relationship to total annual area burned. We used the interagency California fire perimeter database (available online at [http://frap.fire.ca.gov/data/frapgisdata-sw-fireperimeters\\_download.php](http://frap.fire.ca.gov/data/frapgisdata-sw-fireperimeters_download.php)) to calculate annual area burned in the study area. The perimeter database is the most comprehensive, long-term database of fire perimeters in the western United States. It is considered more or less complete back to 1950 for fires  $> 40$  ha. In this work, we only analyzed area burned on USFS-managed lands within the CSO habitat range in the SNEP area.

### Model of area burned at $\geq 50\%$ BA mortality

We used ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to develop a predictive model of area burned at  $\geq 50\%$  BA mortality across all CWHR types, sizes, and densities (4, 5, 6, M, D). Although the regression slope of area burned over 2000–2014 was positive [1.8 (square root-transformed)], the regression was not significant ( $P = 0.48$ , results not shown). Because we suspected the lack of significance was due to a small sample size (15 yr) with area burned at  $> 50\%$  BA mortality, we examined a highly correlated variable (total annual burned area) that has a much longer history (from 1970 to 2014).

Therefore, to develop a predictive model, we used a regression of total annual area burned scaled by the slope of an OLS regression of the square root of area burned at  $\geq 50\%$  BA mortality to the square root of annual area burned from 2000 to 2014:

$$\hat{y} = \hat{a}(\hat{b} + \hat{c} \times X) \quad (1)$$

where  $\hat{a}$  = regression slope of area burned at  $\geq 50\%$  BA mortality to the total annual area burned from 2000 to 2014 (the intercept was not included in the regression model);  $\hat{b}, \hat{c}$  = intercept and slope from the annual area burned time series regression.

To calculate 95% confidence intervals, we estimated the variance of  $\hat{y}$  using the Delta method:

$$V(\hat{y}) = V(\hat{a}) \times V(\hat{b} + \hat{c}X) + V(\hat{a}) \times E(\hat{b} + \hat{c}X) + E(\hat{a}) \times V(\hat{b} + \hat{c}X) \quad (2)$$

We approximated the variances and covariances with their estimates:

$$V(\hat{y}) \cong \hat{\sigma}_y^2 = \hat{\sigma}_a^2 \left( \hat{\sigma}_b^2 + X^2 \hat{\sigma}_c^2 + 2X \widehat{\text{Cov}}(\hat{b}, \hat{c}) \right) + \hat{\sigma}_a^2 (\hat{b} + \hat{c}X)^2 + \hat{a}^2 \left( \hat{\sigma}_b^2 + X^2 \hat{\sigma}_c^2 + 2X \widehat{\text{Cov}}(\hat{b}, \hat{c}) \right) \quad (3)$$

The approximate 95% confidence intervals for the estimate of area burned at  $\geq 50\%$  BA mortality for  $E(\hat{y})$  are therefore:

$$\hat{y} \pm t_{13}^{0.025} \hat{\sigma}_y \quad (4)$$

We investigated three different time series for the annual area burned regression: 1950–2014, 1970–2014, and 1985–2014. All three time series had significant positive slopes. The 1970–2014 model gave the best fit ( $R^2$ ), and the residuals

were closest to being normally distributed. The slope of the 1970–2014 model was also intermediate between the other two models, which is a compromise for under- or overpredicting future effects based on the 1950–2014 or 1985–2014 slopes, respectively. We therefore chose to use annual area burned beginning in 1970 in our regression (i.e., terms  $\hat{b}, \hat{c}$  in Eq. 1). We used square root transformation for all areas to meet OLS residuals normality assumptions and assumptions of equal variance across time. We performed a Durbin–Watson test to check that the residuals of the time series OLS regression were not autocorrelated (Durbin and Watson 1950, 1951). We performed all statistics in SAS ver. 9.4 (SAS Institute Inc. 2012).

## RESULTS

### CSO nesting habitat burned 2000–2014

A total of 85,046 ha of CSO nesting habitat (CWHR 4, 5, 6, M and D: “mature, dense forest”) was burned by fire that resulted in  $\geq 50\%$  BA mortality, reducing canopy cover on average to  $< 25\%$ , during 2000–2014 (Fig. 2, Table 6). Comparing vegetation types across all densities and size classes, RFR had the least nesting habitat burned, both in area and proportion (3963 ha and 2.7% respectively, Table 6). The eastside types (EPN and JPN) had the second least nesting habitat burned in area (5603 ha), but proportionally the largest burned (12.3%). Westside forest types had the most area burned (74,223 ha), which was 7.6% of the total area of the westside types. When restricting tree size and density to CWHR 5D and 6D, which has been found to be the highest quality nesting habitat (Bias and Gutiérrez 1992), the proportion burned was 7.9% for westside types and 25.2% for eastside types.

Losses were proportionally greater for eastside and westside types in the larger size classes compared with the smaller size class (i.e., 5D and 6D vs. 4D) (Table 6). However, that relationship was opposite on the Sequoia National Forest (Table 6). Comparing density classes in the Sequoia National Forest, burned area was lower in the higher canopy cover class (D) in westside types (i.e., 5D and 6D vs. 5M and 6M), but was greater in eastside and RFR types (Table 6). The Plumas, Eldorado, and Sequoia National Forests stand out with the most potential nesting habitat



Table 6. Area and percentage area burned within CSO habitat range on USFS-managed lands during 2000–2014 by CWHR type, size, and density.

| Type†                                            | Size and density | Total area in 2000 (ha) | BA ≥ 90% (ha) | BA ≥ 50% (ha) | BA ≥ 90% (%) | BA ≥ 50% (%) 1 |
|--------------------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|----------------|
| DFR, EPN, JPN, MHC, MHW, MRI, PPN, RFR, SMC, WFR | 4 M              | 306,433                 | 15,996        | 22,761        | 5.2          | 7.4            |
|                                                  | 56 M             | 112,663                 | 6775          | 10,130        | 6.0          | 9.0            |
|                                                  | 456 M            | 419,096                 | 22,771        | 32,891        | 5.4          | 7.8            |
|                                                  | 4 D              | 405,956                 | 18,177        | 25,576        | 4.5          | 6.3            |
|                                                  | 56 D             | 341,508                 | 18,830        | 26,579        | 5.5          | 7.8            |
|                                                  | 456 D            | 747,464                 | 37,007        | 52,155        | 5.0          | 7.0            |
|                                                  | 4 MD             | 712,389                 | 34,173        | 48,337        | 4.8          | 6.8            |
|                                                  | 56 MD            | 454,170                 | 25,606        | 36,709        | 5.6          | 8.1            |
|                                                  | 456 MD           | 1,166,560               | 59,778        | 85,046        | 5.1          | 7.3            |
|                                                  | 4 M              | 227,794                 | 12,998        | 18,484        | 5.7          | 8.1            |
| DFR, MHC, MHW, PPN, SMC, WFR                     | 56 M             | 88,954                  | 6066          | 9127          | 6.8          | 10.3           |
|                                                  | 456 M            | 316,748                 | 19,064        | 27,611        | 6.0          | 8.7            |
|                                                  | 4 D              | 343,506                 | 15,512        | 21,804        | 4.5          | 6.3            |
|                                                  | 56 D             | 312,142                 | 17,598        | 24,808        | 5.6          | 7.9            |
|                                                  | 456 D            | 655,648                 | 33,110        | 46,612        | 5.0          | 7.1            |
|                                                  | 4 MD             | 571,300                 | 28,510        | 40,288        | 5.0          | 7.1            |
|                                                  | 56 MD            | 401,097                 | 23,664        | 33,934        | 5.9          | 8.5            |
|                                                  | 456 MD           | 972,396                 | 52,174        | 74,223        | 5.4          | 7.6            |
|                                                  | 4 M              | 25,745                  | 1446          | 2017          | 5.6          | 7.8            |
|                                                  | 56 M             | 3966                    | 523           | 704           | 13.2         | 17.8           |
| EPN, JPN                                         | 456 M            | 29,711                  | 1969          | 2721          | 6.6          | 9.2            |
|                                                  | 4 D              | 12,074                  | 1560          | 1949          | 12.9         | 16.1           |
|                                                  | 56 D             | 3697                    | 719           | 933           | 19.4         | 25.2           |
|                                                  | 456 D            | 15,771                  | 2279          | 2882          | 14.4         | 18.3           |
|                                                  | 4 MD             | 37,819                  | 3006          | 3966          | 7.9          | 10.5           |
|                                                  | 56 MD            | 7663                    | 1242          | 1637          | 16.2         | 21.4           |
|                                                  | 456 MD           | 45,482                  | 4248          | 5603          | 9.3          | 12.3           |
|                                                  | 4 M              | 52,894                  | 881           | 1448          | 1.7          | 2.7            |
|                                                  | 56 M             | 19,740                  | 158           | 274           | 0.8          | 1.4            |
|                                                  | 456 M            | 72,634                  | 1039          | 1722          | 1.4          | 2.4            |
| RFR                                              | 4 D              | 50,328                  | 1076          | 1553          | 2.1          | 3.1            |
|                                                  | 56 D             | 25,668                  | 506           | 689           | 2.0          | 2.7            |
|                                                  | 456 D            | 75,996                  | 1582          | 2242          | 2.1          | 2.9            |
|                                                  | 4 MD             | 103,223                 | 1957          | 3001          | 1.9          | 2.9            |
|                                                  | 56 MD            | 45,408                  | 663           | 963           | 1.5          | 2.1            |
|                                                  | 456 MD           | 148,631                 | 2620          | 3963          | 1.8          | 2.7            |

Notes: Area and percentages burned are reported for two different relative basal area (BA) mortality thresholds.

† CWHR types are defined in Table 1.

impacted, in both total area and proportion of area (Table 7). The largest area burned at ≥ 50% BA mortality was in westside vegetation types, but the largest proportions were in the eastside types.

#### Area burned at ≥ 50% BA mortality

There was a strong relationship between mature, dense forest area burned at ≥ 50% BA mortality and annual area burned (Fig. 3,  $R^2_{\text{adj}} = 0.96$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). Evaluating annual area burned alone, there was a significant increase over the

period 1970–2014 (Fig. 4,  $R^2_{\text{adj}} = 0.26$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). The residuals of the OLS regression were not autocorrelated (Durbin–Watson  $P > 0.15$  for each of the first four orders). The model for area of mature, dense forest burned within CSO habitat range (Eq. 1, Fig. 5) predicts that the cumulative habitat that burned with resulting ≥ 50% BA mortality exceeds total existing mature, dense forest area in 2014 (1,081,514 ha = 1,166,560 – 85,046 ha; Table 6) after 75 yr (i.e., 2014–2089; 53 and 128 yr for upper and lower 95% confidence limits, respectively).

Table 7. Area and percentage area burned within CSO habitat range on USFS-managed lands during 2000–2014 by type and National Forest (CHWR 4, 5, 6, M, D—mature, dense forest).

| Type†<br>National Forest                            | Total area in<br>2000 (ha) | BA ≥ 90%<br>(ha) | BA ≥ 50%<br>(ha) | BA ≥ 90%<br>(%) | BA ≥ 50%<br>(%) |
|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| DFR, EPN, JPN, MHC, MHW, MRI,<br>PPN, RFR, SMC, WFR |                            |                  |                  |                 |                 |
| Lassen                                              | 181,080                    | 5286             | 8355             | 2.9             | 4.6             |
| Plumas                                              | 270,866                    | 20,531           | 28,147           | 7.6             | 10.4            |
| Tahoe                                               | 164,554                    | 4338             | 6931             | 2.6             | 4.2             |
| Lake Tahoe Basin                                    | 14,670                     | 378              | 464              | 2.6             | 3.2             |
| Eldorado                                            | 111,260                    | 9688             | 11,777           | 8.7             | 10.6            |
| Stanislaus                                          | 109,518                    | 6319             | 8547             | 5.8             | 7.8             |
| Sierra                                              | 179,588                    | 2455             | 4653             | 1.4             | 2.6             |
| Sequoia                                             | 134,915                    | 10,783           | 16,173           | 8.0             | 12.0            |
| Inyo                                                | 108                        | 0                | 0                | 0.0             | 0.0             |
| DFR, MHC, MHW, PPN, SMC, WFR                        |                            |                  |                  |                 |                 |
| Lassen                                              | 150,587                    | 5252             | 8280             | 3.5             | 5.5             |
| Plumas                                              | 249,040                    | 19,768           | 27,156           | 7.9             | 10.9            |
| Tahoe                                               | 144,444                    | 4319             | 6878             | 3.0             | 4.8             |
| Lake Tahoe Basin                                    | 9576                       | 298              | 368              | 3.1             | 3.8             |
| Eldorado                                            | 99,613                     | 8850             | 10,668           | 8.9             | 10.7            |
| Stanislaus                                          | 90,667                     | 4934             | 6751             | 5.4             | 7.4             |
| Sierra                                              | 138,297                    | 1724             | 3262             | 1.2             | 2.4             |
| Sequoia                                             | 90,160                     | 7028             | 10,860           | 7.8             | 12.0            |
| Inyo                                                | 12                         | 0                | 0                | 0.0             | 0.0             |
| EPN, JPN                                            |                            |                  |                  |                 |                 |
| Lassen                                              | 15,082                     | 0                | 0                | 0.0             | 0.0             |
| Plumas                                              | 7238                       | 680              | 873              | 9.4             | 12.1            |
| Tahoe                                               | 2035                       | 0                | 0                | 0.0             | 0.0             |
| Lake Tahoe Basin                                    | 2291                       | 79               | 96               | 3.5             | 4.2             |
| Eldorado                                            | 240                        | 39               | 46               | 16.1            | 19.0            |
| Stanislaus                                          | 3673                       | 8                | 22               | 0.2             | 0.6             |
| Sierra                                              | 3214                       | 19               | 28               | 0.6             | 0.9             |
| Sequoia                                             | 11,709                     | 3423             | 4539             | 29.2            | 38.8            |
| Inyo                                                | 0                          | 0                | 0                | 0.0             | 0.0             |
| RFR                                                 |                            |                  |                  |                 |                 |
| Lassen                                              | 15,380                     | 185              | 264              | 1.2             | 1.7             |
| Plumas                                              | 14,585                     | 64               | 116              | 0.4             | 0.8             |
| Tahoe                                               | 18,059                     | 46               | 68               | 0.3             | 0.4             |
| Lake Tahoe Basin                                    | 2803                       | 0                | 0                | 0.0             | 0.0             |
| Eldorado                                            | 11,407                     | 13               | 19               | 0.1             | 0.2             |
| Stanislaus                                          | 15,178                     | 22               | 64               | 0.1             | 0.4             |
| Sierra                                              | 38,078                     | 112              | 230              | 0.3             | 0.6             |
| Sequoia                                             | 33,045                     | 2178             | 3204             | 6.6             | 9.7             |
| Inyo                                                | 96                         | 0                | 0                | 0.0             | 0.0             |

Notes: Area and percentages burned are reported for two different relative basal area (BA) mortality thresholds.

† CWHR types are defined in Table 1.

## DISCUSSION

Our analysis determined that forest conditions associated with high-quality CSO nesting habitat (i.e., canopy cover >70%) (Phillips et al. 2010, Tempel et al. 2014a, 2015) are being burned with moderate- and high-severity fire effects at an

increasing rate over the last 20–30 yr. The impacts of these increases are particularly concerning in the northern Sierra Nevada, and in the very southern end of the CSO range (Table 7). The largest area of CSO nesting habitat burned at ≥50% BA mortality was in westside mixed conifer forests, but the proportion of habitat burned

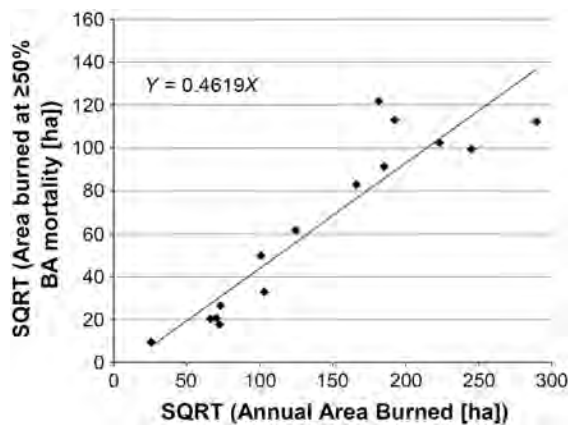


Fig. 3. Regression model of CWHR 4, 5, 6, M, D (mature, dense forest) area burned at  $\geq 50\%$  tree BA mortality to the total annual area burned 2000–2014 (an intercept was not included in the regression model;  $R^2_{\text{adj}} = 0.96$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ).

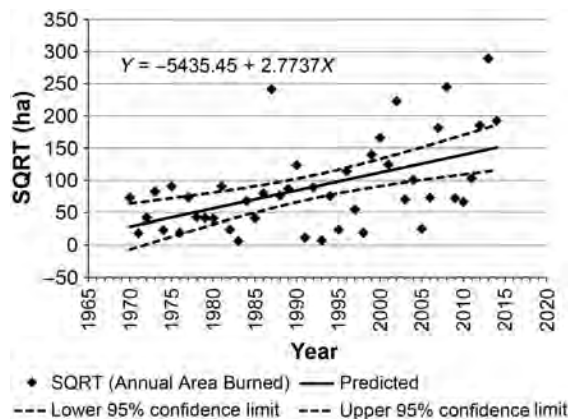


Fig. 4. Least squares regression model for area burned in fires that occurred within CSO habitat range on U.S. Forest Service lands 1970–2014 ( $R^2_{\text{adj}} = 0.26$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ).

at  $\geq 50\%$  BA mortality was higher in eastside pine-dominated forests. Xeric eastside forests are probably more susceptible to severe fire because of their high fuel loads coupled with drier climate (Miller et al. 2012). Our results also demonstrate that if trends based on total area burned in the recent past (1970–2014) continue, a majority of current CSO nesting habitat may be substantially altered by fire (i.e.,  $\geq 50\%$  BA mortality) in the next century. Based on the relationships

between observed mortality in field plots and RdNBR-based BA mortality thresholds presented in Miller and Quayle (2015), it is expected that approximately half of the area included in the  $\geq 50\%$  BA mortality will be devoid of live trees. Given this, the fire-related impacts observed in our study are likely to result in local loss of forest cover or much more open forest conditions than are currently described as suitable CSO nesting habitat (e.g., Tempel et al. 2014a, 2015).

Our models should not be used to derive precise estimates of future forest conditions. As is normal with OLS regression, the confidence intervals widen at the extremes in our model of annual area burned over time (Fig. 4). However, our objective was not to precisely predict the amount of dense forest habitat at any particular point in the future. Rather we wanted to determine whether the loss of dense forest will outpace the replacement rate if the current rate of moderate to high severity fire and increasing trend in area burned continues. Area burned has been predicted to increase due to a climate change (e.g., Westerling et al. 2011). We can only speculate how future fire effects will change because the interactions between climate, fuel accumulation, evolving firefighting policy, and fire area are complex. It is evident, however, that there has been a change in area burned over the last half of the twentieth century (Fig. 4) and that there is a strong relationship between area burned and area burned at moderate to high severity (Fig. 3). Therefore, a model that is based upon empirical data, such as our regression model, implicitly accounts for at least some of these complex interactions. Our methods allow us to put some error bounds on how the trend in area burned and area burned at moderate to high severity may change in the future.

Recent research, however, suggests that fire severity may in fact decrease throughout much of the western United States in response to predicted changes in climate over the next several decades (Parks et al. 2016). The authors attribute these overall decreases to productivity limitations (i.e., accumulation of burnable biomass) forced by warming and decreased moisture availability. Although this is a possible future fire outcome, the predictions from Parks et al. (2016) are largely based on observed fire severity patterns

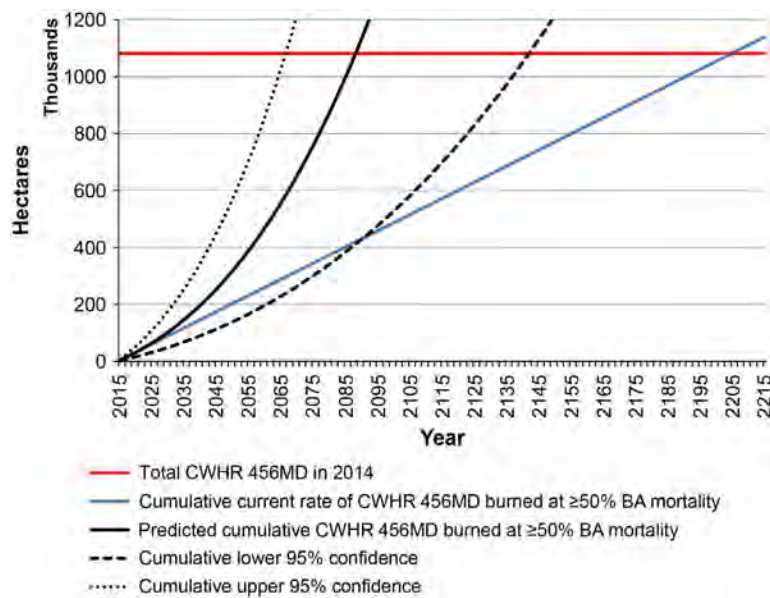


Fig. 5. Predictive model for area of CWHR 4, 5, 6, M, D (mature, dense forest) burned at BA  $\geq$  50% mortality within CSO habitat range on U.S. Forest Service lands. Predicted cumulative area exceeds total existing mature, dense forest area in 2014 by the year 2089 (2067 and 2142 for upper and lower 95% confidence limits, respectively).

from wilderness areas. Many of the forested wilderness areas analyzed lack the dense vegetation structures and accumulated fuels common in nonwilderness forests (Miller et al. 2012), owing to long-established natural fire programs in these wilderness areas (Collins and Stephens 2007, Parks et al. 2014). Current and future trends in wilderness fire severity patterns may not be representative of long fire-suppressed and harvested forests given the differences in vegetation structure and fuels between wilderness and nonwilderness areas. Furthermore, these vegetation structure and fuel differences contribute to different feedback effects on subsequent fire (Coppoletta et al. 2016). For example, dense, fuel-loaded forests that burn at high-severity fire may be susceptible to repeat high-severity fire in short succession (Coppoletta et al. 2016). The opposite feedback (negative) has been observed in wilderness areas with more restored fire regimes (Larson et al. 2013, Parks et al. 2014).

Recovery of closed-canopy forests after stand-replacing fire is dependent on (1) the rate at which areas are replanted, (2) natural regeneration rates and growth in areas that are not replanted, and (3) the rate at which CWHR 3 P, M, and D ("young forests") are being impacted

by severe fire. During 2000–2014, the rate at which young forests burned at  $\geq$  50% BA mortality (results not shown) was slightly greater than the rate in denser, mature forests (7.8% vs. 7.3%). Given the similarity in rates, it could be expected that the area of young forests severely burned would exceed the current total area of young forests in a similar time frame as predicted by the mature, dense forest mortality model (i.e., 75 yr). Although the average age of plantations composed of young forests within CSO habitat range in the most recent CALVEG is about 29 yr (varying from 13 to 45 yr, results not shown), stocking rates of many severely burned areas that have been left to regenerate naturally after recent fires have seedling densities well below current reforestation goals (Collins and Roller 2013, Crotteau et al. 2013, 2014). Even assuming planting and natural regeneration could be expected to match the rate at which young forests are being burned, small or even medium/large trees do not necessarily have the attributes required for CSO nesting that is typical of old trees, for example, broken tops or cavities (Bias and Gutiérrez 1992, LaHaye and Gutiérrez 1999, North et al. 2000). North et al. (2000) found that the average minimum age of CSO nest trees in



the southern Sierra Nevada was >229 yr, which is almost 40 yr longer than the time it will take to burn the total area of mature, dense forests in CSO habitat range at the current rate, and 155 yr longer than our model predicts (Fig. 5).

Our data should be viewed with some caution in estimating impacts to the CSO because we cannot address the issue of the forest patch size at which a significant loss of canopy cover reduces habitat use. Several studies have suggested canopy cover importance may be in providing cover from predators (Forsman et al. 1984, Franklin et al. 2000a, b) and in moderating microclimate conditions (Barrows 1981, Hunter et al. 1995, Weathers et al. 2001). In particular, owl reproduction and fledgling success have been negatively correlated with low temperatures and high precipitation during the reproductive season, suggesting higher canopy cover might provide important protection from inclement weather (LaHaye et al. 1997, North et al. 2000). As canopy cover decreases and porosity increases, microclimate will lose forest-cover modifying effects. One study (Bigelow and North 2012) found little difference in forest microclimate between adjacent forest areas of 50% and 70% canopy cover, but significantly more variable temperatures, relative humidity, and wind speeds when a group selection opening, 0.7 ha in size, was created with only 12% canopy cover. Although this suggests the importance of contiguous canopy cover, it does not indicate how large such areas should be to provide favorable nesting conditions. This is an important area for future research particularly for proposed forest management practices designed to increase forest heterogeneity (North et al. 2009). Identifying the location and size of high-canopy cover, dense forest conditions will be necessary to create diverse habitat conditions in resilient forest landscapes.

It is difficult to reconstruct the canopy cover conditions and habitat patch size variability under which CSO nested historically when the fire regimes were not disrupted, nor is there information on historical owl population size and habitat use patterns under these vegetation conditions. Therefore, it is difficult to predict how or whether CSO will behaviorally adjust or adapt to changes in canopy cover conditions. However, if average canopy cover across large landscapes dominated by pine-mixed conifer

forests was historically <30% (e.g., Collins et al. 2015, Stephens et al. 2015) and CSO inhabited these landscapes for centuries or longer, it raises the question of what composition of vegetation types and amounts and spatial distribution of high-canopy cover habitat supported CSOs under historical conditions.

Recent habitat use studies document consistent CSO selection for high-canopy cover forests (Tempel et al. 2014a). However, these results are based on patterns documented under current forest conditions and may not be representative of owl habitat selection or preferences under historical forest conditions. However, within-stand and landscape heterogeneity appear to have been salient features of historical landscapes with intact fire regimes (North et al. 2009, Perry et al. 2011, Fry et al. 2014, Hessburg et al. 2015, Collins et al. 2016, Rivera-Huerta et al. 2016). The removal of fire and reduction in large trees, snags, and downed logs from past timber harvesting have homogenized current forests (e.g., Hessburg et al. 2005, Lydersen et al. 2013). It is possible that despite having overall much lower canopy cover, the greater number of large trees and variability in historical forests provided the necessary habitat features for CSO nesting, roosting, and foraging. However, the current lack of information on historical owl population distribution and abundance, coupled with no information on habitat use patterns under historical forest conditions, renders it impossible to evaluate this hypothesis. Looking forward, projections of owl occupancy, based on habitat associations derived under current conditions, suggest that fine-scale distribution of closed-canopy habitat may be an important component of climate adaptation strategies under future climate scenarios (Roberts et al. 2011, Jones et al. 2016b).

Our area burned predictive model accounts for the current rate of area that was reburned during the analysis period. However, that rate will likely increase in the future because total area burned has been predicted to increase due to climate change (Westerling et al. 2011). How an increased reburn rate will affect future fire effects is unknown. Previous fires have reduced the effects in subsequent fires in areas where naturally ignited fires have been allowed to burn in forests in the Sierra Nevada (Collins et al. 2007, 2009, van Wagtendonk et al. 2012, Lydersen

et al. 2014) and in northwestern Mexico (Rivera-Huerta et al. 2016). However, if the status quo is maintained (i.e., fire suppression and minimal restoration treatments—see North et al. [2012]), then most USFS lands will continue to burn severely and the area that would have burned at low to moderate severity will continue at a deficit (Stephens et al. 2007, Mallek et al. 2013, Calkin et al. 2015). Unless this trend is changed, it is likely that CSO nesting habitat will continue to decline as a result of wildfire.

The main challenges of conserving the CSO are also impacting the NSO. Conservation of the NSO has already experienced a drier, more fire-prone environment (e.g., east of the Cascade Range crest) where owl conservation is questionable because losses of old-growth forests to wildfire have been relatively high, and risks of further loss remain (Spies et al. 2006, 2010, Gaines et al. 2010, Lehmkuhl et al. 2015). Meanwhile, major fire events in older forests following the USFS Northwest Forest Plan exceeded the scope of previous fires and losses of forests with large-diameter trees were concentrated on federal lands in the drier East Cascades and Klamath provinces, where increased impact by fire outweighed decreased disturbance by harvesting (Spies et al. 2006).

### *Management strategies*

Of the potential responses to the threat to CSO nesting habitat from wildfire, four merit particular discussion. The first is to increase fire suppression and prevention resources in an attempt to preserve mature, dense forests. This idea may seem logical, but even with a large escalation of resources spent to suppress wildfires (e.g., 1995 wildfire expenses represented 16% of the USFS-appropriated funds, which, by 2015, increased to 52% [ $> \$1.5$  billion] [USDA-FS 2015]), the amount of area burned annually (Fig. 4) and proportion of high-severity fire continue to increase in the Sierra Nevada (Miller et al. 2009b, Miller and Safford 2012, Mallek et al. 2013). Increasing fire suppression resources will not lead to resilient forests (Stephens et al. 2014b) and the long-term conservation of the CSO. Furthermore, with increased suppression only the most destructive fires that escape initial attack will occur, leading to losses of the forests we endeavor to protect (North et al. 2015b).

A second possibility to reduce the losses of CSO nesting habitat is to strategically reduce fire hazards in landscapes populated by owls using mechanical treatments and/or prescribed fire. Research has determined that managing matrix lands outside of declared reserves is fundamental to the conservation of biodiversity (Franklin and Lindenmayer 2009). Methods exist to determine the most fire-prone areas of a landscape, even when areas for rare species are excluded from treatment (Moghaddas et al. 2010, Ager et al. 2013, Collins et al. 2013). Based on simulation predictions, strategic treatments that intentionally avoid owl nesting habitat produce a moderate reduction in landscape fire behavior (Tempel et al. 2015, Dow et al. 2016). Also, these fuel and restoration treatments are typically accomplished with few negative impacts to forest ecosystems (soils, insects, vegetation, small mammals, songbirds, etc.), because most ecosystem components exhibit very subtle or no measurable change relative to untreated areas (Stephens et al. 2012). However, given the many economic, administrative, and social constraints on landscape fuel treatment projects (Collins et al. 2010, North et al. 2015a), relatively small proportions of landscapes are actually treated in many projects. As a result, even “treated” landscapes can be overrun by large fires burning under more extreme fire conditions because even when treatments are strategically placed to slow fire, they are often too small to impact large fires burning at unprecedented rates of spread.

The 2013 Rim Fire in the central Sierra Nevada is an example where a fire burned through CSO habitat with enough intensity to overwhelm areas previously treated to reduce fire hazards (Lydersen et al. 2014). This likely occurred because the last 100 yr of fire suppression and harvesting dramatically transformed the vast majority of the forest burned by the Rim Fire, with forest density, especially of less fire-tolerant and shade-tolerant white fir, increasing approximately 10-fold and increasing forest canopy cover by a factor of two (Scholl and Taylor 2010, B. Collins, *unpublished data*, 2015). These types of landscape conditions can overwhelm strategic designs that only treat 10–20% of the landscape. However, landscapes that receive strategically placed treatments are certainly an improvement over untreated landscapes regarding potential

fire behavior and effects (Ager et al. 2007, 2010, Moghaddas et al. 2010, Collins et al. 2011, 2013) and can serve as anchor points to allow large-scale prescribed fire programs (North et al. 2012).

A third possibility to reduce the vulnerability of CSO nesting habitat is to increase the amount of managed wildfire in CSO habitat outside the wildland–urban interface. Managed wildfire can produce vegetation patterns and structures that are resilient to large-scale fire (Holden et al. 2007, Collins et al. 2009, van Wagten et al. 2012, Stephens et al. 2013, Parks et al. 2014), but it is not possible to precisely predict the ecological effects of such fires, particularly on CSO nesting habitat that commonly has high fire hazards from multilayered canopies and relatively high densities of downed logs, snags, and smaller woody fuels (surface fuels). Under burning CSO PACs would increase their survivability before a regime of managed wildfire was implemented. Research has shown that CSO will occupy territories that experience low- to moderate-severity fires (Roberts et al. 2011, Lee et al. 2012, 2013), but how owls respond to large patches of high-severity fire is currently under investigation. Some evidence indicates owls may occupy sites that experience relatively high proportions of high severity (>70%) in the first year after the fire, although strong site fidelity may confound short-term owl response (Lee and Bond 2015). Recent radiotelemetry research within a large, disproportionately high-severity fire in the northern Sierra Nevada (2014 King Fire) found CSO strongly avoided high-severity burned areas with the authors concluding that megafires were an emerging threat to old-forest species (Jones et al. 2016a).

Increasing managed wildfire in USFS lands in the Sierra Nevada could be part of this strategy, especially in remote, higher elevation red and white fir and upper elevation mixed conifer forests that are common in these areas. There is evidence that fire area is increasing at higher elevations in our study area (Schwartz et al. 2015). Whereas there has not been any link found between fire frequency and severity in red fir forests (Steel et al. 2015), increases in tree regeneration and continuity of fuels in higher elevation forests associated with a warming climate have been observed (Dolanc et al. 2013). It remains to be seen how these and future changes in forest

structure of higher elevation forests will impact the retention or development of new CSO nesting habitat. Fire refugia could be an important component of CSO conservation in fir and mixed conifer forests with active fire regimes (Camp et al. 1997). Fire refugia are in topographic and physiographic settings that moderate stand-replacing fire probabilities (Wilkin et al. 2016); such areas could serve as nesting habitat for the CSO.

A fourth approach to reducing the vulnerability of CSO nesting habitat would be to initiate a forest restoration strategy that uses historical landscape information to identify areas likely to sustain denser, mature forests under an intact fire regime (including fire refugia). These areas could be developed to support greater tree densities and overall biomass, while the remaining portions of the landscape would be treated with mechanical thinning and/or prescribed fire to meet long-term forest resilience objectives. In essence, this would strive to manage landscapes to emulate the inherent heterogeneity of landscapes that emerged under the influences of historic fire and other disturbances. Several large, spatial, historical landscape-scale forest reconstructions have been published from the Sierra Nevada (Collins et al. 2011, 2015, Stephens et al. 2015) that could inform such an exercise. For example, in two of these areas (central and southern Sierra Nevada), pine-dominated mixed conifer and ponderosa pine-forested landscapes in 1911 had average canopy cover <30%. However, these reconstructions did note considerable variability in forest structure across the respective landscapes, with approximately 10–15% of the area dominated by denser forests. Given that fire burned freely through the historical landscape, there was probably a dynamic pattern of denser forest patches adjacent to open, regenerating areas. Other areas of mixed conifer forests probably had higher canopy cover and supported CSO nesting habitat. Identifying these types of areas could inform a long-term strategy to conserve the CSO by maintaining denser forest structures in these areas and treating the remaining areas to reduce the chances of high-intensity crown fire entering CSO nesting habitat.

Although current approaches for CSO conservation have emphasized the retention of existing habitat (PACs, home ranges, etc.), this is

primarily a static, fine-filter view of conservation that may not succeed long term (Agee 2003). Our estimates of how moderate- and high-severity fire may affect mature, dense forests into the future are particularly concerning to CSO persistence. Indeed, the recent CSO monitoring following the 2014 King Fire (Jones et al. 2016a) is a telling example of this. More comprehensive forest restoration activities are needed on federal lands in CSO habitat to avoid significant losses of older forests, particularly if recent climatic trends continue (Healey et al. 2008). As implementation of landscape forest restoration and fuel reduction strategies can affect CSO (Stephens et al. 2014a), further understanding is needed on the distribution, number, and habitat quality that can be supported across restored landscapes that experience management and dynamic fire regimes.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We wish to thank R. Gerrard for the CSO range map and J. Baldwin for help with the statistics. We appreciate the comments from three reviewers that improved the manuscript. This work was partially funded by the Pacific Southwest Region of the U.S. Forest Service.

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