

I am a volunteer on the Board of Friends of Cave Creek Canyon where I serve on the trail committee. On August 23 the US Forest Service Douglas Ranger District held a community meeting to discuss the implications for trail work in the Chiricahua Mountains, based on the June 2024 Biological Opinion for Trail Maintenance on the Coronado National Forest. Present were a US Forest Service wildlife biologist and a recreation specialist from the Douglas Ranger District.

According to the Biological Opinion, the US Forest Service and Friends of Cave Creek Canyon are to protect Threatened Species by limiting trail work during certain seasons. The Mexican Spotted Owl, a resident of middle- and high-elevation canyons that frequently nests in the tops of broken off snags, is one of four such threatened species in the Coronado National Forest.

The US Forest Service has data from the US Fish and Wildlife Service and independent biologists. The consensus seems to be that any noise above 69 decibels will adversely affect breeding and nesting Mexican Spotted Owls. Sixty-nine decibels is at the upper range for normal conversation which is between 60-70 decibels. There are approximately 17 packs of threatened Mexican Spotted Owls scattered throughout the Chiricahua Mountains.

The Endangered Species Act requires federal agencies to ensure that activities they authorize, fund, or carry out are not likely to destroy or negatively alter critical habitat. According to the US Forest Service, noise level above 69 decibels will negatively alter habitat for these owls, especially during March through August when they breed and raise their young. Therefore Friends of Cave Creek Canyon is prohibited from maintaining trails during this period to ensure a successful breeding and nurturing environment for these relatively large owls.

Based on this information received from the US Forest Service who earlier submitted comments regarding the US Air Force proposal, how can the US Air Force possibly justify using a photograph of the Mexican Spotted Owl in its introductory video seen in Zoom presentations on September 4 and 5 and, more importantly, justify an increase in the number of supersonic flights—plus lowering the floor for these flights—which will almost certainly negatively impact these threatened owls?

—Rene Donaldson
Portal, Arizona