

Northern Long-Eared Bat

Issue

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) proposed listing the Northern Long Eared Bat (NLEB) as “endangered” under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) on October 2, 2013. A final decision on an official listing was slated for October, 2014, but has been postponed for 6 months by USFWS to April 2, 2015. The general consensus (including USFWS) is that the sole threat to these bats’ populations is a non-native fungal disease discovered in 2006 called White Nose Syndrome (WNS) for which there is no known cure. What is known is that this disease is devastating to NLEB colonies once established, with morbidity rates exceeding 90 percent in many instances. While there is agreement that WNS is the root cause for the NLEB’s decline, there is disagreement over approaches to address the issue. Legitimate questions exist as to whether the USFWS is using the best science to evaluate the species and, as a number of comments on the proposed listing demonstrate; the best available science does not support listing the species as endangered.

The NLEB’s range is enormous, encompassing the following 39 states (including D.C.): AL, AR, CT, DE, FL, GA, IL, IA, IN, KS, KY, LA, ME, MD, MA, MI, MN, MS, MO, MT, NE, NH, NJ, NY, NC, ND, OH, OK, PA, RI, SC, SD, TN, VA, VT, WV, WI and WY.

Background

The USFWS has released interim guidance to protect the species from take, although the agency has identified WNS, not take potentially associated with habitat loss or other land use activities, as the threat to the continued existence of the species. As currently drafted, there could be a number of negative outcomes specific to the forest industry, including:

- Restrictions on warm season timber harvesting from April to October
- Seasonal limitations on activities within 5 mile radius of bat hibernacula
- In known or potential summer habitat, restrictions will be in force within 1.5 mile radius of any known roost tree or 3 miles from any location where NLEB has been captured or acoustically detected.
- Overly broad restrictions on forest management, such as direction to “retain and avoid impacting **potential** roost trees, which includes live or dead trees and snags equal to or greater than 3 inches diameter at breast height (dbh) that have exfoliating bark, cracks, crevices or cavities.”

USFWS has stated that any activity that involves the removal of summer roosting trees could impact the species and result in an unlawful take. However, restrictions on harvest or removal of potential roost trees would likely have a minimal impact on preserving the species and has no demonstrated relationship to preventing the spread of WNS. USFWS acknowledges, “[e]ven if all habitat-related stressors were eliminated or minimized, the significant effects of WNS on the northern long-eared bat would still be present.” In areas without impacts from WNS, ongoing timber harvest has had no identified impact on the abundance of the species.

The fact is, where WNS is not yet present, populations of NLEB appear to be quite robust. For instance, the NLEB is one of the most frequently captured bat in mist net surveys on the Black Hills National Forest in South Dakota, one of the most heavily managed National Forests in the country. Moreover, prior to the introduction of WNS, NLEB's were regarded as "most common" in the Northeastern portion of their range. This vast swath of states, ranging from Northern New England through the lower portion of the Lake States and Indiana, contains a mosaic of habitat types, forest ownerships, and land use practices. This strongly suggests that the bat is not dependent on a particular type of habitat, much less a particular age class of forest.

Unfortunately, the ESA is not well structured to address non-human threats such as WNS, so USFWS will likely focus its final guidance on protecting all individual bats from all conceivable human-induced impacts— even though USFWS recognizes that human activities, including timber harvests, have never had an appreciable negative effect on the species to date.

Unintended Consequences

In addition, listing the NLEB would severely limit the ability of forest management professionals, including state and federal agencies and departments, to manage critical habitats for other species of special concern such as the Kirtland's Warbler, the Karner Blue Butterfly, the Golden-winged Warbler, Red Cockaded Woodpecker, and numerous savanna species that are dependent on intensive management.

Specifically, with an endangered designation come restrictions on harvest, thinning, and prescribed burning that could significantly complicate the U.S. Forest Service's effort to maintain and enhance the habitat for other listed species.

Hardwood Federation Position

If the restrictions currently included in the interim guidance become final and are enforced, they would have a devastating effect on forest management, forest landowners, and the entire forest products value chain. We are working with our allies in Congress and in the States to help communicate to USFWS the need to take the time necessary to find a solution to this issue that works to preserve the NLEB and the many jobs and communities that depend on the forest for their livelihood.