

THE BLACK-BACKED WOODPECKER IN AN ERA OF FIRE SUPPRESSION AND SALVAGE SALES: IS LOSS OF FIRE-KILLED FOREST A THREAT TO THIS SPECIES?^{TWS}

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Black-backed woodpeckers are often described as a fire-dependent species. The species is most abundant within 5 years of a burn, though they also occur in unburned forest with insect infestations. Intense fire suppression efforts have reduced "early-post-fire" habitat in forested areas at low- to mid-elevation compared to levels in the past century. In lodgepole forest, areas that would have burned are now dying from epidemics of mountain pine beetle. "Salvage" timber sales target dead and dying forest, including burns and insect-infested areas that are breeding habitat for black-backed woodpeckers. The Forest Service is charged with maintaining viable populations of all species within each forest. Given the current low level of this species's primary habitat, biologists on the Lolo NF (Missoula, MT) are concerned about the effect of salvage sales on black-backed woodpeckers.

Information about the species's ecology and demographics (especially outside of burns and beetle-killed areas) is incomplete or contradictory. Data on local population and on population trends are non-existent. The "coarse filter" approach (comparing current available habitat to past levels) allows assessment of the species' local status and of the potential effects of salvage sales. In this paper, I discuss: (1) the methods used to assess amount of fire-killed habitat available in the past and trends over recent decades and results; (2) whether beetle-killed stands can be used as a substitute for fire-killed habitat; (3) whether mitigation via creation of fire-killed stands in prescribed fire is a feasible option; and (4) whether the species seems to be vulnerable and, if so, under what conditions.