



# STAFF REPORT

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**Meeting Type:** Operations Committee/Board of Directors  
**Title:** Professional Services Agreement for Northern Spotted Owl 2025 and 2026 Monitoring (MA-6390)  
**From:** Shaun Horne, Director of Watershed Resources  
**Through:** Ben Horenstein, General Manager  
**Meeting Date:** January 17, 2025

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**TYPE OF ACTION:**                      Action                                      Information                                      X Review and Refer

**RECOMMENDATION:** Review and refer a Professional Services Agreement with Point Blue Conservation Science in the amount of \$199,223 for two years of Northern Spotted Owl Survey work to a future regularly scheduled bi-monthly meeting of the Board of Directors to consider approval

**SUMMARY:** Each year, the District carries out protocol level Northern Spotted Owl surveys to determine occupancy status of nests throughout the watershed and to monitor long-term population trends. Staff will be requesting that the Board of Directors approve and authorize the general manager to sign a Professional Services Agreement (MA-6390) in the amount of \$199,223 with Point Blue Conservation Science for two years of Northern Spotted Owl Survey work. This contract supports watershed operations, project level environmental compliance and watershed stewardship efforts.

**DISCUSSION:** The Northern Spotted Owl (NSO; *Strix occidentalis caurina*), ranging from southern British Columbia to Marin County, California, is one of three subspecies of the Spotted Owl. It is a year-round resident found primarily in older, coniferous forests. The NSO was listed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) as a Federally Threatened subspecies in 1990, with declines mostly attributed to habitat loss. Due to continued declines, the NSO was also approved for listing as Threatened under California’s State Endangered Species Act in 2016 (Forsman et al. 2011, USFWS 2011, Dugger et al. 2016). Since 1999 the District and other public land managers in Marin County have been monitoring NSO annually to better understand population trends and to determine occupancy and nesting status at sites where proposed management activities may occur to inform avoidance measures. Long-term monitoring has demonstrated that NSO are doing well in Marin County with a 90% study average for nest occupancy from 1999-2023 demonstrating that current watershed operations and stewardship activities are supporting the health of NSO on the watershed.

Each year, the District carries out protocol level Northern Spotted Owl surveys to determine occupancy status of nests throughout the watershed. These surveys ensure that the District can complete critical infrastructure and fuel reduction work without impacting sensitive biological species on the watershed. In October of 2019, the District adopted the Biodiversity, Fire, and Fuels Integrated Plan (BFFIP), which

describes the actions the District will implement to reduce wildfire hazards and to maintain and enhance ecosystem function on the District's watershed. Vegetation management under the BFFIP aims to reduce fuel loads, improve forest health, preserve defensible space, and reduce invasive weed species. Ahead of new vegetation management projects, the District conducts per-project environmental compliance surveys to ensure that vegetation management activities do not impact sensitive natural resources. This Professional Services Agreement will support annual monitoring of historical nesting sites in the vicinity of planned vegetation management areas and other District construction projects on the watershed, which is crucial for avoiding impacts to Northern Spotted Owls during project implementation.

The District continues to scale up vegetation management work and forest restoration on the watershed to address fuel load issues and to treat non-native invasive plants. Through the use of environmental compliance measures the District can schedule and coordinate vegetation management work to avoid sensitive biological and physical resources. Furthermore, ongoing monitoring of the occupancy and reproductive status of Northern Spotted Owls helps to track the health of this species in Marin County, and to detect any early warning signs of declines. In recent years, Point Blue has detected Barred Owls in Marin County which can threaten the local NSO population through competition for space and food, as has been well-documented in other parts of its range (Wiens et al. 2014, Dugger et al. 2016, Franklin et al. 2021). The District and Point Blue through this contract will continue to evaluate how Barred Owls influence the NSO population in Marin County to help inform watershed stewardship.

**Proposal Selection Process:** On September 18, 2022, the District released a Request for Proposals (RFP) for a two-year Northern Spotted Owl monitoring contract. The RFP was sent to three local environmental consulting firms with experience in biological monitoring. Proposals were received by the District on October 2, 2022, and Point Blue Conservation Science (PBCS) was selected as the most qualified firm.

**ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW:** None.

**FISCAL IMPACT:** The funds for environmental compliance for BFFIP implementation are budgeted in part within Watershed Fund Center 2044 which will be used to cover the \$199,223 NSO contract costs.

**ATTACHMENT(S):** None.