
North Carolina Red-Cockaded Woodpecker Safe Harbor Program



Questions and Answers

Q. What is a Red-cockaded Woodpecker?

A. The red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW) is a federally endangered bird that inhabits mature pine forests across the southeastern United States. The RCW needs help to survive because it lacks a sufficient amount of suitable habitat. It is one of eight species (types) of woodpeckers in North Carolina and the only species of woodpecker that excavates a cavity in **living** pine trees instead of dead ones.

Q. What is the North Carolina Red-cockaded Woodpecker Safe Harbor Program?

A. The North Carolina Red-cockaded Woodpecker Safe Harbor Program is a state program authorized through an agreement between U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC) under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). The agreement allows WRC to enter into **voluntary** Safe Harbor Management Agreements with non-federal landowners who agree to implement land management techniques that benefit RCWs in exchange for regulatory assurances that no additional ESA restrictions will be imposed as a result of their management actions. Landowners decide whether or not they want to participate in the program and a management agreement can be terminated with a 60-day written notice to WRC.

Q. Who can participate?

A. Any non-federal landowner (private, corporate, state, or county) in North Carolina whose property is east of NC Highway 29-Interstate 85 and falls outside the boundaries of the NC Sandhills Safe Harbor Program is eligible to enroll in the program. A property must either currently have RCWs using it or have the potential to support RCW habitat. Properties

owned by WRC are not eligible for the program but other state-owned properties will be considered.

Q. Why is the Safe Harbor Program important?

A. Conservation efforts on non-federal lands can boost RCW numbers by providing habitat buffers around established RCW populations, by linking isolated RCW populations, by providing young RCWs to boost other populations, and by protecting valuable habitat.

Q. How does the Safe Harbor Program benefit landowners?

A. The use of a land tract by RCWs brings with it some land use restrictions under the ESA. Many landowners are fearful that their land management actions may result in the use or increased use of their property by RCWs. The Safe Harbor Program benefits landowners by providing regulatory assurances that no additional land use restrictions will be imposed as a result of their management actions. Landowners enrolled in the Safe Harbor Program may make any lawful use of their property as long as they fulfill their baseline responsibilities and complete any other agreed upon habitat management.

Q. What are baseline responsibilities?

A. Baseline responsibilities are a condition of the Safe Harbor Management Agreement between WRC and a landowner. Landowners agree to maintain and/or enhance RCW cavity trees and foraging habitat that exists on their property at the time an agreement is signed.

Q. What types of habitat management benefit RCWs?

A. RCWs need older pine forests that have an open midstory and a grass-dominant understory for nesting and finding food. Many previously occupied nesting sites (called 'clusters') have been abandoned by RCWs because of hardwood encroachment into the midstory and overstory. This encroachment transforms open, pure pine forests preferred by RCWs into dense pine-hardwood forests that the birds do not like.

Landowners can remove and control hardwood encroachment by using prescribed fire on a recurring basis, by applying chemicals to vegetation, or by mechanically removing hardwoods and/or shrubby vegetation. Landowners can also plant longleaf pine and lengthen timber rotations to grow the older pine trees preferred by RCWs. In addition, landowners are encouraged to thin overstocked stands to create and maintain a more open pine forest preferred by RCWs.

Q. Can I enroll in the program if my property currently has no RCWs?

A. Yes. A property does not have to currently have RCWs using it and in this case, the landowner has no baseline responsibilities. However, the property should have the potential to provide suitable RCW habitat. Landowners will be required to implement habitat management on the property that creates or maintains suitable RCW habitat. WRC will determine whether or not proposed habitat management is suitable for the program.

Q. Can I terminate the agreement?

A. Termination of a management agreement results in a loss of the regulatory assurances and the RCW incidental take authority provided to a landowner by the agreement. A landowner's RCW responsibilities will return to those outlined in the RCW Recovery Plan (2003).

Q. Can I sell my land? Are these agreements transferable?

A. Yes, you can sell or transfer your land to another owner. If ownership is transferred, WRC will honor the agreement. The new owner must willingly sign the original agreement or a new mutually agreeable one to receive the benefits. Transfer of ownership requires a 30-day written notice. If the new landowner does not wish to participate in the Safe Harbor Program, then the agreement may be terminated.

Q. Is financial and/or technical assistance available?

A. A landowner is solely responsible for funding and completing all agreed upon habitat management activities. However, WRC can provide technical assistance whenever possible and will provide financial assistance for certain activities when funding is available. This assistance is not guaranteed. Financial and technical assistance is also available from other sources; for example, other government agencies, private consultants, and private groups. WRC can help landowners in finding and acquiring this assistance.

Q. What are the steps to develop a management agreement?

A. First, you must contact the RCW Safe Harbor Biologist. Second, you provide information such as a map of the property and proposed management activities or land uses. Third, WRC will make a site visit. Fourth, WRC or an agreed upon consultant will determine the baseline responsibilities. Finally, the coordinator will work with you to develop a Safe Harbor Management Agreement.

For more information, contact:

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