

# The Safe Harbor Program for Red-cockaded Woodpeckers in North Carolina

*Provides  
assistance  
and benefits  
to private  
landowners*

*The red-cockaded woodpecker is an endangered bird that lives in mature pine forests across the southeastern United States. It is one of eight species of woodpeckers in North Carolina and can be distinguished from the others by large, white cheek patches and by a lack of noticeable red color on the head. It is the only woodpecker that excavates a cavity in living pine trees instead of dead ones. It is also a highly social bird that lives in family groups. Each group of red-cockaded woodpeckers occupies a cluster of cavity trees allowing each member of the group to have its own cavity for roosting.*



Jim Hamata



Ralph Costa



NCWREC



NCWREC

### Why is it Endangered?

Red-cockaded woodpeckers are endangered primarily due to habitat loss and changes in land use. Red-cockaded woodpeckers prefer older, open pine forests for foraging and nesting. They do not like woody vegetation, such as shrubs and hardwoods, growing into the midstory and overstory. Historically, **periodic fire** maintained these forests in an open condition.

### Safe Harbor Program

The Safe Harbor Program is a landowner incentive program developed by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) under the Endangered Species Act to

benefit red-cockaded woodpeckers through **voluntary** habitat improvements by North Carolina landowners. The program is administered by FWS in the Sandhills region of North Carolina and by N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC) in the Piedmont and Coastal Plain regions.

### Goals

- to maintain and enhance red-cockaded woodpecker habitat in North Carolina through voluntary land management commitments by landowners
- to help North Carolina landowners by removing some of the regulatory restrictions imposed by the federal Endangered Species Act
- to benefit other plants and animals that inhabit red-cockaded woodpecker habitat

### Eligibility

Any property owner within the coverage area can apply for enrollment in the Safe Harbor Program. However, all enrolled properties and the habitat management activities performed on those properties must provide an overall conservation benefit to red-cockaded woodpeckers.

**"Safe Harbor has proven to be a "user friendly" program that has helped us manage our property both for economic benefits and for wildlife, without fear of burdensome restrictions from the presence of endangered species," said Julian Johnson, a landowner in Hoke County who has been enrolled in the program since 2000.**

The Safe Harbor Program is interested in properties that meet one or more of the following situations:

- red-cockaded woodpeckers are currently using the property for nesting and/or foraging (feeding) either entirely or partially, or
- the property had red-cockaded woodpeckers using it at some time in the past, or
- the property has longleaf, loblolly, slash and/or pond pine stands.

#### *Landowner Benefits*

When red-cockaded woodpeckers inhabit a property some land use restrictions apply under the Endangered Species Act. Many landowners are fearful that their land management actions may result in the use or increased use of their property by red-cockaded woodpeckers. The Safe Harbor Program provides regulatory assurances to landowners 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 activities. Baseline responsibilities are a condition of the Safe Harbor Program.

U.S. Forest Service



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Dave Menke



#### **What are baseline responsibilities?**

The maintenance and/or enhancement of pre-existing red-cockaded woodpecker cavity trees or foraging habitat. If red-cockaded woodpeckers are not currently using the property – as determined by a professional survey – then the landowner has no baseline responsibilities.

#### *Flexibility*

Safe Harbor agreements are voluntary, and therefore, participating landowners are allowed to terminate, transfer

and change their agreements. If a landowner decides to terminate a Safe Harbor agreement, he or she will lose the regulatory assurances and the red-cockaded woodpecker incidental take authority provided to him or her by the agreement. However, should a landowner decide to sell his or her land or transfer ownership in some way, then the new owner may assume the responsibilities and benefits in the existing agreement, work with the Safe Harbor biologist to draft a new agreement or decide to terminate the agreement. Safe Harbor agreements may also be amended to respond to changing conditions on the property or to changes in a landowner's goals.

Landowners may want to use their enrolled property as a home site or for economic benefit. Many land uses can be compatible with woodpecker habitat management including

- timber production,
- pine straw raking,
- quail management,
- hiking, hunting or other recreation and
- horse farms.



D. GUYER / FISHBECK

## Habitat Management

The Safe Harbor Program will require participating landowners to perform or allow one or more habitat improvements on their property. The number and type of habitat improvements to be performed on an enrolled property will

depend on several factors, such as habitat condition and type, presence of woodpeckers and proposed land uses. All habitat enhancement activities will be mutually agreed upon by the landowner and the program administrator.

### *Some woodpecker habitat enhancement activities*

- burning with prescribed fire on a recurring basis
- controlling midstory and overstory hardwoods using prescribed fire, chemicals, or mechanical removal
- planting longleaf pine on appropriate sites and maintaining those pines for more than 30 years
- lengthening pine timber rotations
- thinning pine stands and maintaining those stands at recommended standards
- managing timber in a way that is compatible with woodpecker habitat requirements.



Craig Rudolph



NCWRC



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- installing artificial cavities in occupied or unoccupied habitat and maintaining those cavities

### **Woodpecker and Wildlife Benefits:**

The red-cockaded woodpecker has been in a long-term decline throughout its range, most noticeably on privately-owned land. Voluntary beneficial management actions by North Carolina landowners, even if those actions are not permanent, will help the red-cockaded woodpecker by slowing, stopping, or reversing its decline; maintaining continuity of its habitat across the landscape; buffering against the catastrophic loss of existing habitat and birds that can result from major storms or other disturbances; and potentially providing young woodpeckers to supplement existing populations.

Many species of native grasses and wildflowers can benefit from woodpecker management, particularly when prescribed fire is used on a regular basis. Fire actually stimulates and promotes growth of native grasses and wildflowers.

The grassy understory that develops with fire is beneficial to many animals, such as bobwhite quail and Bachman's sparrow. In addition, the open, park-like condition of woodpecker habitat is preferred by eastern bluebirds, red-headed woodpeckers and many other animal species. Game animals, like deer and southeastern fox squirrels, also utilize longleaf pine savannas.

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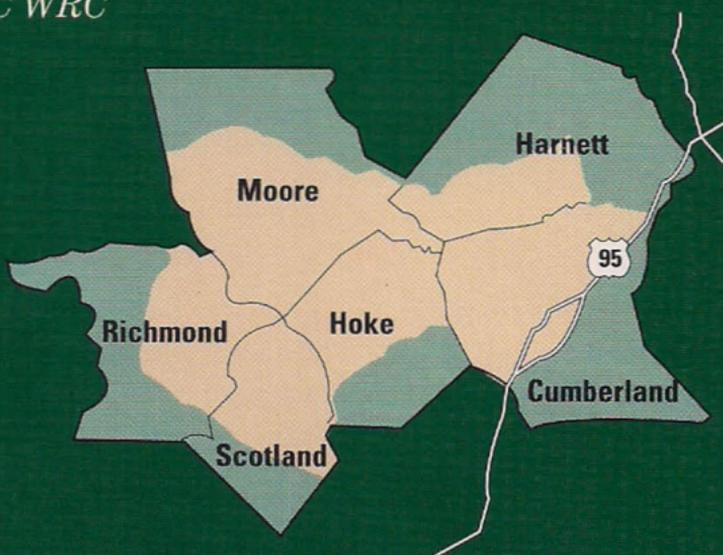
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**August 2006**



 *North Carolina Red-Cockaded Woodpecker Program Area*  
*Contact NC WRC*



 *Sandhills Red-Cockaded Woodpecker Program Area*  
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