

Habitat Conservation Programs for Private Landowners



These slides represent a presentation given by Brad Howard, NCWRC Private Lands Program Coordinator, at several Wildlife Action Plan and Spatial Tools regional workshops in Spring 2017.

Wildlife Conservation Lands Program



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The Wildlife Conservation Land Program (WCLP) allows landowners who have owned their property for at least five years and want to manage for protected wildlife species or priority wildlife habitats to apply for a reduced property tax assessment in the form of a property tax deferral.

Introduction

- Legislation that recognizes wildlife conservation land as a special class of property that must be assessed at a reduced value
- Signed into law in 2008
- Effective January 1, 2010
- Administered by NCWRC
 - Incorporates priorities from the NC Wildlife Action Plan



This program was introduced in House Bill 1889, established by the passage of Session Law 2008-171, and codified as G.S. 105-277.15. House Bill 1889 was ratified by the N.C. General Assembly on July 16, 2008 and signed into law on August 4, 2008.

- This legislation amended several portions of Chapter 105 of the N.C. General Statutes and designated “wildlife conservation land” as a special class of property that must be assessed at a reduced value.
- Sections 1 through 5 of the law take effect for taxable years on or after July 1, 2010 and landowners with approved Wildlife Habitat Conservation Agreements (WHCA) may apply to their county for a reduced assessment of their land as wildlife conservation land during the regular listing period beginning January 1, 2010.

Program Structure



- Modeled after the Present Use Value programs, but NOT one of them
- Tax evaluation at agricultural PUV rate
- Carries the same penalties as PUV programs



Currently, land enrolled in the N.C. Present-Use-Valuation (PUV) program and classified as agricultural, horticultural, or forest land is assessed by counties at a reduced value.

Technically there is no such thing as 'Wildlife PUV' but wildlife conservation land must be appraised and assessed as if it were classified under PUV as agricultural land. This may account for the name confusion.

The WCLP is similar to PUV in that landowners must still apply to their county tax office for a property tax deferment but the WCLP is actually a completely separate program and is not part of PUV.

Benefits of WCLP

- Provides deferred taxes for landowners whose management objectives are:
 - Conserving priority wildlife habitat
 - Providing habitat for protected species



Only land with priority habitats or protected wildlife species will qualify.

- Six priority habitats have been identified as follows - longleaf pine forest, early successional habitat, small wetland community, stream and riparian zone, rock outcrop, and bat cave.
- Protected wildlife species are those designated by the state wildlife agency (NCWRC) as endangered (E), threatened (T), or special concern (SC). Having listed plant species will not qualify under the WCLP. Only land with protected animal species or priority habitats will qualify.

Acreage & Mgmt

- Qualifying acreage 20-100 contiguous acres.
- Land managed for WCLP purposes for ≥3yrs prior to application or enrolled in one of the PUV programs
- Signed agreement and management plan/map



A landowner must have at least 20 contiguous qualifying acres. No more than 100 acres of an owner's land in a county may be classified as wildlife conservation land.

- That means 20 acres of wildlife habitat designated as priority habitat or as habitat to conserve a protected wildlife species, not just 20 acres of land.
- Contiguous means that the qualifying habitat must be connected in a block of at least 20 acres, not just add up to 20 acres.

Landowners may enroll land currently receiving a reduced tax rate as agricultural, horticultural or forest land as wildlife conservation land provided the landowner meets all other requirements related to wildlife conservation land.

For land not currently enrolled in the PUV program, landowners must demonstrate to the county assessor and the NCWRC that the land has been used for the purpose outlined in the wildlife habitat conservation agreement for three years preceding January 1 of the year for which the benefit is claimed.

A wildlife conservation land must be managed under a written Wildlife Habitat Conservation Agreement with NCWRC. The agreement must be entered into as of January 1 of the year for which the benefit is claimed.

Ownership

- Property ownership of ≥ 5 yrs prior to WCLP application
- Property must be owned by individual, family business, or family trust
 - No publicly traded corporations
- WCLP transfers with property if new owner files application with county within 60 days of land transfer



The landowner may be an individual, a family business entity, or a family trust (publicly traded corporations are not eligible).

The land must have been owned by the same owner for the previous five (5) years, with the following exceptions:

1. if the land is owned by a family business, at least one of the current members of the business must have owned the land for the past five years;
2. if the land is owned by a family trust, at least one of the current beneficiaries must have owned the land for the past five years; or
3. if a new owner acquires land already classified as wildlife conservation land, the classification is retained if the new owner files an application with the county and signs the existing wildlife habitat conservation agreement with NCWRC within 60 days of acquiring the property.

Application Process



- Landowner submits the Application for Assistance to WRC
- WRC conducts site visit to determine eligibility
- WRC provides assistance to prepare the Wildlife Habitat Conservation Agreement



The landowner submits an application to begin the process of developing a Wildlife Habitat Conservation Agreement with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission – a copy of the application form is available here

http://www.ncwildlife.org/Portals/0/Conserving/documents/InterestApplication_WC_LP.pdf

A NCWRC staff biologist will contact you concerning your application and assist you with the development of a Wildlife Habitat Conservation Agreement.

Application Process

- Landowner submits the Wildlife Habitat Conservation Agreement and the tax assessment application to the county tax office
- The county assessor will determine if the property qualifies for tax deferment



Upon approval of the wildlife habitat conservation agreement, the landowner must make application to the county to request their property be assessed as wildlife conservation lands.

The landowner must submit an application to the county assessor's office during the regular listing period which is typically the month of January for the year in which the landowner desires the assessment.

Components of the WHCA



- Landowner information
- Tract location and Property Tax ID number
- Priority habitat or species managed
- Parcel acre and mgmt. acre
- Enrolled in PUV?
- Tract map with aerial and mgmt. acreage indicated
- Planned mgmt. actions



A NCWRC biologist will work directly with the landowner (or their designee) to complete a Wildlife Habitat Conservation Agreement which will provide the landowner with the information they need to submit a request to the county tax assessor's office to request the deferred tax rate. The agreement will be signed by the landowner and the NCWRC.

The management agreement must:

- document the presence of a NCWRC protected species or the existence of one or more of the priority habitats and
- describe the management strategies in place or planned with appropriate timelines to ensure the continued existence of the protected species, the priority habitat, or both.
- A map of the property with a definable scale and the wildlife conservation land and acreage appropriately indicated must be included in the plan.

WRC Provided Assistance

- Help landowner decide if WCLP is the right program for them
- Help landowner understand the requirements of WCLP
- Assist landowner with the documentation process (species and habitats)



The first step is requesting assistance from a NCWRC biologist.

WRC Provided Assistance



- Assist landowner with the application process
- Connect the landowner to the appropriate resources (WRC biologist, county tax office, private consultants, habitat or species specialists)



To request information on the “Introduction to the Wildlife Conservation Land Program,” obtain an ‘Application for Wildlife Resources Commission Assistance’, or if there are additional questions regarding the program, visit the NCWRC web page www.ncwildlife.org/Conserving/Programs/Land-Conservation-Program or contact the NCWRC headquarters in Raleigh at (919) 707-0050 and they will direct interested applicants to the appropriate field representative for their area.

Priority Species

- Must document the presence of a protected species
 - Must “live on the land”
- Must manage their land in a manner that protects the species and its habitat
- WRC must approve the management

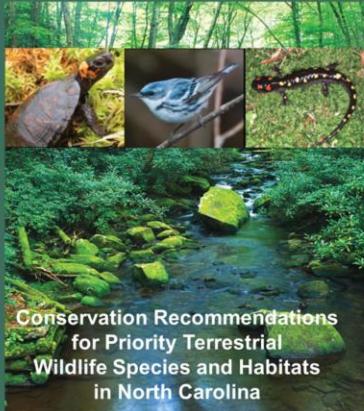


The first qualifying condition is met if one or more protected wildlife species lives on the land and the landowner manages the land to protect the species. Protected wildlife species are those designated by NCWRC as endangered, threatened, or special concern.

The term or phrase “lives on the land” means that a wildlife species has been identified on the land at the time the benefit is claimed and the term “protect” means that the species is protected through appropriate land management strategies.

Observation of a species does not automatically qualify a property as wildlife conservation land. Demonstrable evidence must be presented that the species lives on the land, and habitat management strategies must be implemented that provide for the protection of the species. For migratory species, the land must provide breeding, wintering, or foraging habitat.

Priority Habitats



- Early Successional
- Rock Outcrops
- Stream and Riparian Zones
- Small Wetland Communities
- Longleaf Pine Forest
- Bat Caves



The second qualifying condition can be met if the landowner conserves one or more priority wildlife habitats listed below.

- longleaf pine forest
- early-successional habitat
- small wetland community
- stream and riparian zone
- rock outcrop
- bat cave

The term “conserve” means to manage for the continued wildlife benefits of one of the above priority habitat types as specified in a written wildlife habitat conservation agreement.

Determination of the priority habitat may incorporate an area of influence surrounding the habitat if that land is essential to and managed for the conservation of the priority habitat.

Conservation does not preclude some human uses of the land.



Most land ownership in North Carolina is characterized as nonfederal rural lands, which means that nearly all land is in private, municipal, state, or tribal ownership. The NC Forest Service reports that approximately 86% of the farm and forest land holdings in North Carolina are privately owned land.

It is most often the case that landscapes represent many different landowners. For example, private land can be adjacent to public lands without any clear boundary separating the natural communities in the landscape. Successful wildlife habitat conservation needs effective partnerships forged among private landowners and public land managers.

The NCWRC will work with private landowners to identify common conservation goals and to work toward cooperative achievement of those goals. Technical guidance can assist landowners with managing their land to support a high diversity of wildlife species.



There are numerous state, federal, and private programs that can facilitate wildlife management. Federal and state programs often have rigid technical specifications and inspections to assure that program goals are met. Added to that, financial incentives available to landowners can vary from year to year depending on available funding.

Patience is frequently required to negotiate the maze of forms, agreements, and audits that accompany government conservation programs.

The NCWRC employs biologists devoted to private lands issues. These professionals can provide assistance on a variety of land-management issues, including habitat management for game and nongame species.

A Few Tools in the Toolbox

- Professional Knowledge and How to Use it
- Farm Bill Programs
 - CRP (Conservation Reserve Program)
 - EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program)
 - CSP (Conservation Stewardship Program)
- Forest Stewardship
 - Holistic management plans
 - New association with the Tree Farmers Assoc.



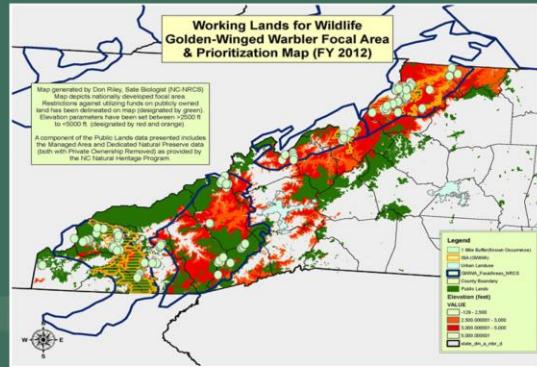
NCWRC private lands biologists can introduce private landowners to available programs that fit their needs, such as cost-share programs (e.g., Farm Bill programs) and technical guidance on habitat improvement (e.g., Forest Stewardship Program, Forest Landbird Legacy Program).

For information and assistance with these and other Farm Bill and Private Land Programs, landowners can find contact information for a Private Lands Wildlife Biologist in their area at:

<http://www.ncwildlife.org/Portals/0/Conserving/documents/CURE/NCWRC-Private-Lands-Brochure.pdf.pdf>

Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW)

- Focal species for North Carolina is the Golden-winged warbler



Numerous State and Federal agencies are working together to address the decline of Golden-winged Warbler and cost-share assistance for habitat management on private lands is one available tool.

The Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) helps landowners who may want to create or maintain the warbler's habitat (and benefit many other songbirds and game species). Typical habitat recovery practices include cutting trees and spraying stumps with herbicides to restore or expand critical shrubland habitat. Landowners who have current populations of birds are advised to use prescribed burning, herbiciding, and cutting sprouts of small trees to prevent shrubland from becoming a forest again.

Private landowners who have Golden-winged warblers have the option of putting their land in the Wildlife Conservation Land Program that provides reduced property tax liability.

■ Golden-winged Warblers have suffered one of the steepest population declines of any songbird species in the past 45 years, and in some states populations have declined over 90%.

Other Species that Benefit

- ❖ Elk
- ❖ Timber Rattlesnake
- ❖ Virginia Big-eared Bat
- ❖ Gray Bat
- ❖ Northern Long-eared Bat
- ❖ Bobwhite Quail
- ❖ Eastern Cottontail
- ❖ Ruffed Grouse
- ❖ Rafinesque Big-eared Bat
- ❖ Eastern Small Footed Bat
- ❖ Indiana Bat
- ❖ Vesper Sparrow
- ❖ Appalachian Cottontail



Groups of species that use the same resources but are not taxonomically related are often referred to as an ecological guild. Habitat management that benefits Golden-winged Warblers will also benefit guild species that use the same habitat.

Longleaf Pine

Establishing New Forests

The Longleaf pine ecosystem provides critical habitat for 29 threatened and endangered species and is a priority resource concern in North Carolina.

The NCWRC Private Lands Program targets restoration of fire-dependent longleaf pine ecosystems within the historic longleaf pine range. Biologists can provide information on both technical and financial assistance programs to help landowners improve habitat on agricultural land or nonindustrial private forest by implementing conservation practices including planting longleaf pine, installing firebreaks, conducting prescribed burning, and controlling invasive plants.

The NCWRC also provides technical guidance to evaluate the presence of priority species, existing habitat quality, the potential for habitat enhancement, tract size, and contribution to habitat and species conservation.



***Don't want to miss the
Forest for the Trees!!!!!!***

Creating a Diverse Understory

While this picture shows a longleaf pine stand, it does not represent a resilient longleaf pine ecosystem.

Resilient ecosystems retain essential processes in the face of disturbances or expected shifts in ambient conditions; ecosystem resilience provides the ability to support native diversity.

Conservation priorities need to include the greatest variety of biological diversity possible as a means of ensuring that genetic diversity and ecosystem services remain viable as our environment is changed by natural and man-made forces.



Fire is a natural part of North Carolina's ecosystem. Low-intensity fire historically occurred across the state to maintain some ecosystems. Today, prescribed burning is essential to the perpetuation, restoration, and management of many plant and animal communities.

Prescribed burning is used as a forest management tool to reduce fuels and the risk of wildfire, and for ecosystem restoration, oak regeneration, understory control, and wildlife conservation.

The importance of continued use and reintroduction of prescribed fire as a habitat management tool is critical to several natural communities.



This picture shows a resilient longleaf pine ecosystem.

Populations of many plant and animal species dependent upon longleaf pine ecosystems have declined. The goal of NCWRC is to assist private landowners who are interested in restoring habitat for at-risk species and implement management plans with biodiversity and natural community restoration goals.

Corporate CURE



- Corporate CURE works with commercial swine producers in the south eastern coastal plain.
- Uses grant funding to promote early successional habitat along waterways and natural ecosystem enhancements.



What is CURE and why does wildlife need it?

CURE is the Cooperative Upland habitat Restoration and Enhancement program developed by the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC) because wildlife that require early-successional habitats are among the most imperiled species in the United States, across the South, and within North Carolina. Using grant funds from the North Carolina Department of Justice, NCWRC was able to implement practices designed to improve water quality and enhance early-successional habitat for wildlife. Through time, this work has grown to four counties as additional farms have been added to the program. Currently, over 15,500 acres of private corporate farms are enrolled and represent some of North Carolina's best early-successional habitat

CURE addresses the decline of an entire ecosystem of species requiring brushy, grassy, and weedy landscapes. Bobwhite quail have become the “flagship species” among this group, but it also includes numerous declining songbirds, many species of mammals such as rabbits, pollinators such as butterflies, and many species of amphibians and reptiles.

Lots of Names & Lots of Things!

Longleaf Initiative

*Private Lands
Diversity*

Stewardship

WCLP

Technical Guidance

Habitat Conservation

CRP

EQIP

PUV

CURE

Farm Bill



There are lots of government programs, meaning there are lots of acronyms.

The technical assistance biologists with the NC Wildlife Resources Commission are able to assist landowners with understanding and navigating through the programs to find the information and programs that will help them achieve their conservation goals.



Landowners ARE the key!!!!!!



Private landowners that are committed to conservation on their lands are the foundation of the conservation of wildlife habitat in North Carolina.

As the population of our State continues to increase the demands of a growing human population will intersect with the need for conservation of wildlife and wildlife habitats.

Questions?



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