

Wildlife Conservation Land Program



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Introduction

This document serves as an explanation of the landowner requirements for the Wildlife Conservation Lands reduced assessment program. This program was introduced in House Bill 1889, established by the passage of Session Law 2008-171 (Appendix I), 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. 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. G.S. 105-277.15 specifies that land designated as “wildlife conservation land” must be assessed for taxation as if it were classified as agricultural land under G.S. 105-277.3.

Sections 1 through 5 of the law take effect for taxable years on or after July 1, 2010 and landowners 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.

Requirements for Participation in the Program

There are a number of requirements relating to both land ownership and land use listed in G.S. 105-277.15, and landowners interested in the program should reference this statute for specific language. The most important requirements are outlined below.

A. Acreage

Wildlife conservation land must consist of at least 20 contiguous qualifying acres managed under a written wildlife habitat conservation agreement. No more than 100 acres of an owner’s land in a county may be classified as wildlife conservation land.

B. Land Use

The land must meet one of two conditions to qualify as wildlife conservation land. The first 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 ([Protected Species](#)).

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.

The second condition can be met if the landowner conserves one or more priority wildlife habitats listed below and described in Appendix II.

- 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.

C. Ownership

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 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.

D. Prior Land Classification

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. 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.

E. Penalty for Not Fulfilling Landowner Obligations

The difference between the taxes that are due on wildlife conservation land and what would be due if the land were taxed on the basis of the true value of the property is a lien on the property. If the land loses its eligibility for the deferral as a result of a disqualifying event, the deferred taxes for the three preceding years are due and payable to the county. Deferred taxes are not due in special circumstances as provided in G.S. 105-277.15(1)(f).

F. Application

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.

NCWRC Wildlife Habitat Conservation Agreement

The statute specifies that 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.

The management agreement must:

- document the presence of a NCWRC protected species ([Protected Species](#)) or the existence of one or more of the priority habitats (Appendix II) 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 Wildlife Habitat Conservation Habitat Agreement form is available from the NCWRC at [WHCA](#). NCWRC staff biologists are available to assist landowners with completion of the agreement and NCWRC approval is required prior to submission to the County tax assessor's office. 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 County Assessor will determine if the land qualifies for an assessment at a reduced value.

Appendix I: Session Law 2008-171

GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF NORTH CAROLINA
SESSION 2007

SESSION LAW 2008-171
HOUSE BILL 1889

AN ACT to provide property tax relief for qualifying wildlife conservation land, to clarify the present-use valuation of property subject to a conservation easement, AND TO PROVIDE A PROPERTY TAX EXEMPTION FOR LEASEHOLD INTEREST IN CERTAIN EXEMPTED PROPERTY.

The General Assembly of North Carolina enacts:

SECTION 1. Article 12 of Subchapter II of Chapter 105 of the General Statutes is amended by adding the following new section to read:

"§ 105-277.15. Taxation of wildlife conservation land.

- (a) Definitions. – The following definitions apply in this section:
- (1) Business entity. – Defined in G.S. 105-277.2.
 - (2) Family business entity. – A business entity whose members are, directly or indirectly, individuals and are relatives. An individual is indirectly a member of a business entity if the individual is a member of a business entity or a beneficiary of a trust that is part of the ownership structure of the business entity.
 - (3) Family trust. – A trust that was created by an individual and whose beneficiaries are, directly or indirectly, individuals who are the creator of the trust or a relative of the creator. An individual is indirectly a beneficiary of a trust if the individual is a beneficiary of another trust or a member of a business entity that has a beneficial interest in the trust.
 - (4) Member. – Defined in G.S. 105-277.2.
 - (5) Relative. – Defined in G.S. 105-277.2.
- (b) Classification. – Wildlife conservation land is designated a special class of property under Article V, Section 2(2) of the North Carolina Constitution and must be appraised, assessed, and taxed in accordance with this section. Wildlife conservation land classified under this section must be appraised and assessed as if it were classified under G.S. 105-277.3 as agricultural land.
- (c) Requirements. – Land qualifies as wildlife conservation land if it meets the following size, ownership, and use requirements:
- (1) Size. – The land must consist of at least 20 contiguous acres.
 - (2) Ownership. – The land must be owned by an individual, a family business entity, or a family trust and must have been owned by the same owner for the previous five years, except as follows:
 - a. If the land is owned by a family business entity, the land meets the ownership requirement if the land was owned by one or more members of the family business entity for the required time.

- b. If the land is owned by a family trust, the land meets the ownership requirement if the land was owned by one or more beneficiaries of the family trust for the required time.
 - c. If an owner acquires land that was classified as wildlife conservation land under this section when it was acquired and the owner continues to use the land as wildlife conservation land, then the land meets the ownership requirement if the new owner files an application and signs the wildlife habitat conservation agreement in effect for the property within 60 days after acquiring the property.
- (3) Use. – The land must meet all of the following requirements:
- a. The land must be managed under a written wildlife habitat conservation agreement with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission that is in effect as of January 1 of the year for which the benefit of this section is claimed and that requires the owner to do one or more of the following:
 - 1. Protect an animal species that lives on the land and, as of January 1 of the year for which the benefit of this section is claimed, is on a North Carolina protected animal list published by the Commission under G.S. 113-333.
 - 2. Conserve any of the following priority animal wildlife habitats: longleaf pine forest, early successional habitat, small wetland community, stream and riparian zone, rock outcrop, or bat cave.
 - b. It must have been classified under G.S. 105-277.3 when the wildlife habitat conservation agreement was signed or the owner must demonstrate to both the Wildlife Resources Commission and the assessor that the owner used the land for a purpose specified in the signed wildlife habitat conservation agreement for three years preceding the January 1 of the year for which the benefit of this section is claimed.
- (d) Restrictions. – The following restrictions apply to the classification allowed under this section:
- (1) No more than 100 acres of an owner's land in a county may be classified under this section.
 - (2) Land owned by a business entity is not eligible for classification under this section if the business entity is a corporation whose shares are publicly traded or one of its members is a corporation whose shares are publicly traded.
- (e) Deferred Taxes. – The difference between the taxes that are due on wildlife conservation land classified under this section and that would be due if the land were taxed on the basis of its true value is a lien on the property. The difference in taxes must be carried forward in the records of each taxing unit as deferred taxes. The deferred taxes for the preceding three fiscal years are due and payable in accordance with G.S. 105-277.1D when the land loses its eligibility for deferral as a result of a disqualifying event. A disqualifying event occurs when the property no longer qualifies as wildlife conservation land.
- (f) Exceptions to Payment. – No deferred taxes are due in the following circumstances and the deferred taxes remain a lien on the land:
- (1) When the owner of wildlife conservation land that was previously classified under G.S. 105-277.3 before the wildlife habitat conservation agreement was signed does not transfer the land and the land again becomes eligible for classification

under G.S. 105-277.3. In this circumstance, the deferred taxes are payable in accordance with G.S. 105-277.3.

- (2) When land that is classified under this section is transferred to an owner who signed the wildlife habitat conservation agreement in effect for the land at the time of the transfer and the land remains classified under this section. In this circumstance, the deferred taxes are payable in accordance with this section.

(g) **Exceptions to Payment and Lien.** – Notwithstanding subsection (e) of this section, if land loses its eligibility for deferral solely due to one of the following reasons, no deferred taxes are due and the lien for the deferred taxes is extinguished:

- (1) The property is conveyed by gift to a nonprofit organization and qualifies for exclusion from the tax base under G.S. 105-275(12) or G.S. 105-275(29).
- (2) The property is conveyed by gift to the State, a political subdivision of the State, or the United States.

(h) **Administration.** – An owner who applies for the classification allowed under this section must attach a copy of the owner's written wildlife habitat agreement required under subsection (c) of this section. An owner who fails to notify the county assessor when land classified under this section loses its eligibility for classification is subject to a penalty in the amount set in G.S. 105-277.5."

SECTION 2. G.S. 105-277.1D(a), as enacted by Section 2.2 of S.L. 2008-35 and amended by Section 28.11(h) of House Bill 2436 of the 2008 Session, reads as rewritten:

"(a) **Scope.** – This section applies to the following deferred tax programs:

- (1) G.S. 105-275(29a), historic district property held as future site of historic structure.
- (2) G.S. 105-277.1B, the property tax homestead circuit breaker.
- (3) G.S. 105-277.4(c), present-use value property.
- (4) G.S. 105-277.14, working waterfront property.
- (5) G.S. 105-277.15, wildlife conservation land.
- (6) G.S. 105-278(b), historic property.
- (7) G.S. 105-278.6(e), nonprofit property held as future site of low- or moderate-income housing."

SECTION 3. G.S. 105-282.1(a)(2) reads as rewritten:

- "(2) **(Effective for taxes imposed for taxable years beginning on or after July 1, 2009)** Single application required. – An owner of one or more of the following properties eligible for a property tax benefit must file an application for the benefit to receive it. Once the application has been approved, the owner does not need to file an application in subsequent years unless new or additional property is acquired or improvements are added or removed, necessitating a change in the valuation of the property, or there is a change in the use of the property or the qualifications or eligibility of the taxpayer necessitating a review of the benefit.
 - a. Property exempted from taxation under G.S. 105-278.3, 105-278.4, 105-278.5, 105-278.6, 105-278.7, or 105-278.8.
 - b. Special classes of property excluded from taxation under G.S. 105-275(3), (7), (8), (12), (17), (18), (19), (20), (21), (35), (36), (38), (39), or (41) or under G.S. 131A-21.

- c. Special classes of property classified for taxation at a reduced valuation under G.S. 105-277(h), 105-277.1, 105-277.10, 105-277.13, 105-278.105-278, or 105-277.15.
- d. Property owned by a nonprofit homeowners' association but where the value of the property is included in the appraisals of property owned by members of the association under G.S. 105-277.8.
- e. Special classes of property eligible for tax relief under G.S. 105-277.1B."

SECTION 4. G.S. 105-277.3(d1) reads as rewritten:

"(d1) Exception for Easements on Qualified Conservation Lands Previously Appraised at Use Value. – Property that is appraised at its present-use value under G.S. 105-277.4(b) shall continue to qualify for appraisal, assessment, and taxation as provided in G.S. 105-277.2 through G.S. 105-277.7 as long as (i) the property is subject to an enforceable conservation easement that would qualify for the conservation tax credit provided in G.S. 105-130.34 and G.S. 105-151.12, without regard to actual production or income requirements of this section; and (ii) the taxpayer received no more than seventy-five percent (75%) of the fair market value of the donated property interest in compensation. Notwithstanding G.S. 105-277.3(b) and (b1), subsequent transfer of the property does not extinguish its present-use value eligibility as long as the property remains subject to an enforceable conservation easement that qualifies for the conservation tax credit provided in G.S. 105-130.34 and G.S. 105-151.12. The exception provided in this subsection applies only to that part of the property that is subject to the easement."

SECTION 5. G.S. 105-277.3 is amended by adding a new subsection to read:

"(d2) Wildlife Exception. – When an owner of land classified under this section does not transfer the land and the land becomes eligible for classification under G.S. 105-277.15, no deferred taxes are due. The deferred taxes remain a lien on the land and are payable in accordance with G.S. 105-277.15."

SECTION 6. The Revenue Laws Study Committee is directed to study the three-year impact of classifying land as wildlife conservation land for property tax purposes. The study must include a review of the amount of property classified as wildlife conservation land, the fiscal impact on local governments, and any other impact.

The Revenue Laws Study Committee must include its findings in the 2015 report.

SECTION 7.(a) G.S. 105-275(31) reads as rewritten:

"§ 105-275. Property classified and excluded from the tax base.

The following classes of property are hereby designated special classes under authority of Article V, Sec. 2(2), of the North Carolina Constitution and shall not be listed, appraised, assessed, or taxed:

...

(31) Intangible personal property other than a leasehold interests interest that is in exempted real property and is not excluded under subdivision (31e) of this section. This subdivision does not affect the taxation of software not otherwise excluded by subdivision (40) of this section."

SECTION 7.(b) G.S. 105-275 is amended by adding a new subdivision to read:

"(31e) A leasehold interest in real property that is exempt under G.S. 105-278.1 and is used to provide affordable housing for employees of the unit of government that owns the property."

SECTION 7.(c) G.S. 105-282.1(a)(2) reads as rewritten:

"(2) Single application required. – An owner of one or more of the following properties eligible to be exempted or excluded from taxation must file an application for exemption or exclusion to receive it. Once the application has been approved, the owner does not need to file an application in subsequent years unless new or additional property is acquired or improvements are added or removed, necessitating a change in the valuation of the property, or there is a change in the use of the property or the qualifications or eligibility of the taxpayer necessitating a review of the exemption or exclusion:

- a. Property exempted from taxation under G.S. 105-278.3, 105-278.4, 105-278.5, 105-278.6, 105-278.7, or 105-278.8.
- b. Special classes of property excluded from taxation under G.S. 105-275(3), (7), (8), (12), (17), (18), (19), (20), (21), (31e), (35), (36), (38), (39), or (41) or under G.S. 131A-21.
- c. Special classes of property classified for taxation at a reduced valuation under G.S. 105-277(h), 105-277.1, 105-277.10, 105-277.13, 105-278.
- d. Property owned by a nonprofit homeowners' association but where the value of the property is included in the appraisals of property owned by members of the association under G.S. 105-277.8."

SECTION 8. Sections 1 through 5 of this act are effective for taxes imposed for taxable years beginning on or after July 1, 2010. Section 7 of this act is effective for taxes imposed for taxable years beginning on or after July 1, 2008. Notwithstanding G.S. 105-282.1, an application for the exclusion in G.S. 105-275(31e), as enacted by this act, is timely if filed on or before September 1, 2008. The remainder of this act is effective when it becomes law.

In the General Assembly read three times and ratified this the 16th day of July, 2008.

s/ Marc Basnight
President Pro Tempore of the Senate

s/ Joe Hackney
Speaker of the House of Representatives

s/ Michael F. Easley
Governor

Approved 2:50 p.m. this 4th day of August, 2008

Appendix II: Priority Habitat Descriptions

These habitat types are listed as habitats of concern in the 2005 North Carolina Wildlife Action Plan (NCWAP) and more detailed information concerning each habitat type may be found at [NC Wildlife Action Plan](#) .

Early Successional Habitat

Early successional habitat is represented best by land where most trees have been removed either through natural means or by human activity. This habitat type requires frequent disturbance that suppresses tree growth to prevent the land from returning to forest. The land must be managed with periodic disturbances such as timber harvest, disking, mowing, burning, and/or herbicide treatments to maintain this condition. Common types of early-successional habitat include recently abandoned farm fields, clear cuts, field borders, savannas, prairies, meadows and mountain balds.

Early successional habitat can be a mix of grasses, forbs, legumes, wildflowers, vines, shrubs and saplings. Scattered mature trees may be present but not to the point that they shade out the beneficial understory vegetation. Tree density within this habitat type must be at a level such that the forest canopy remains open and the ground cover of grasses, forbs and other wildlife beneficial vegetation is not diminished. Early successional habitat in a degraded condition can be revived with disturbance.

Early successional wildlife habitat differs from other open land by the vegetative component represented. While pastures, hayland, and agriculture crops may be considered early successional lands, they should only be considered early successional habitat if they are composed of vegetation that is considered beneficial to wildlife and the land is managed for that purpose. An example of this situation includes native warm season grass fields where forbs have been mixed with the grass and the landowner uses a wildlife compatible management strategy.

The NCWAP identifies 31 priority wildlife species associated with early successional habitat. Bobwhite quail, cottontail rabbits, whip-poor-wills, eastern meadowlark, eastern box turtles, and painted buntings are some of the most well-known early successional dependent species. These species have declined drastically in North Carolina and elsewhere in the U.S. over the past 50 years, and their conservation is a state and national priority.

Stream and Riparian Zones

Stream and riparian zone habitat is defined as the land area adjacent to and including a perennial or intermittent water body. The riparian zone generally extends from the water's edge at base flow to the place where the stream does not interact with or influence the type and density of vegetation present, generally where the upland ecological community begins. It encompasses the stream banks and floodplain along with the plant communities as well as the plant material (grass, leaves, twigs, branches, trees, etc.) likely to enter the stream. Stable riparian zones contain stream banks that are not eroding and have diverse plant communities that are generally undisturbed. Scientific literature indicates that while grass has some minimum riparian buffer

benefits a mature forest is needed to serve all the riparian buffer functions. A diverse plant community is recommended to provide maximum wildlife value within the area.

For purposes of this document the riparian area is measured horizontally from the top of the stream bank. A minimum riparian buffer width of 30 feet is suggested for the Wildlife Conservation Land Program as a means to accommodate a variety of landowners and for minimal water quality benefits. The maximum width is 300 feet or the width of the floodplain, whichever is greater. The riparian zone shall not extend beyond the watershed boundary as delineated by the ridges surrounding the watershed. The stream area included in this habitat type shall be the area as measured between the top of the banks along the channel.

It is imperative to note that there are situations when an even wider riparian buffer may be needed to protect aquatic biota and their habitats. Dependent on site specific situations, some landowners may be required by NCWRC staff to include areas wider than 30 feet. Some examples of these situations include: 1) adjacent land uses that are likely to impact surface waters, 2) the surrounding slopes are steep, or 3) known locations of priority aquatic or terrestrial species. Additionally, livestock must be fenced out of all streams for which WCLP classification is being claimed.

Inevitably situations will arise where a landowner does not own land extending 30 feet on either side of the stream channel. In situations where landowners cannot protect the total minimum footage, they must protect the riparian zone to the extent possible. For example, a landowner would be unable to include the minimum footage when: 1) their property boundary is the centerline of the stream channel, 2) the property boundary is within 30 feet of the top of the stream bank, or 3) there is a permanent structure within 30 feet of the stream bank. However, a minimum width of 15 feet must be available regardless of the land use. The lack of riparian habitat protection in these situations should be compensated by ensuring that the average stream and riparian zone width is 30 ft for projects only on one side of the channel or 60 feet when the project includes both sides of the stream channel.

Bat Cave

Caves are mainly found scattered across the Southern Blue Ridge physiographic province, although some do occur in other regions of the state. While there are several different types of caves, the most common types found in North Carolina are solution caves, fissure caves, and rock shelter/boulder caves. These types of caves differ primarily in the way they are formed. Solution caves are created by the action of water, dissolving the underlying rock to form tunnels. Fissure caves are formed by movement of the earth's surface that results in cracks of the rock layers. Rock shelter/boulder caves are formed by erosive forces, weather events, earth surface movements, and other factors, which essentially leave spaces underneath/behind surface rock. The vast majority of caves in North Carolina are rock shelter/boulder caves. In addition to natural caves, extensive mining in North Carolina has resulted in numerous manmade subterranean excavations that also function as bat caves. The definition of cave habitat is intended to include only mines that include subterranean excavations with conditions inside the mine shafts and tunnels that resemble natural caves.

Caves may be used by 13 species of bats in North Carolina for hibernation, birthing and the raising of pups, and roosting; while other caves may not be used by bats at all. In order to be considered bat cave habitat, the cave must have documented use by aggregations of bats.

The volume of air, temperature, and relative humidity are important factors limiting use of caves by bats. Surface conditions surrounding cave entrances can have significant effects upon those conditions. In addition, land use in the immediate vicinity of cave entrances can affect air flow through the cave and foraging conditions for resident bats and can render the cave unsuitable for bats due to disturbance by humans. For all these reasons, bat cave habitat includes an area encompassed by the cave and all its entrances as well as the surface area necessary to maintain the temperature, air flow, humidity, foraging, and disturbance regime such that conditions for bat use are retained.

Rock Outcrop

Rock outcrop habitat is comprised of numerous distinct ecological community types described in the North Carolina Wildlife Action Plan. These community types include boulderfields, rocky summits, granitic domes, acidic cliffs, mafic cliffs, granitic flatrocks, and talus slopes. In general rock outcrops are often characterized as open canopy communities with patchy vegetation due to variability in soil depth and moisture content; however, specific rock outcrop habitats can occur within a forested setting (e.g., boulderfields within northern hardwood forests or small rock outcrops within any forest habitat). Lichens and mosses occur on bare rock and other vegetation may develop in deep moss mats or crevices (oatgrass species, sedges, mountain dandelion). Woody plants or trees such as mountain laurel, Catawba rhododendron, table mountain pine, red spruce, various oaks, and yellow birch may occur in the deepest soil mats, rock crevices, and at the edge of these habitats. Water seepage through rock crevices may provide moisture for amphibians, mosses, lichens, and wetland vegetation. Regardless of ecological classification, rock dominates the surface of the land.

Many wildlife species utilize rock outcrop habitat without regard to elevation (e.g., peregrine falcon), whereas others will utilize only high elevation rock outcrop habitats (e.g., rock voles and rock shrews). However, many wildlife species and even more plant species are associated with both high and low elevation rock communities. The elevation limits for each species are quite variable.

The conditions present at individual rock outcrops are unique, owing to geology, geography, elevation, moisture, and landscape position. They may contain discreet communities, or they may be dispersed among a variety of other community types that are connected through local geology and landscape conditions. As such, the extent of habitat that each rock outcrop provides is dependent upon the entire set of conditions in and surrounding the surface rock. Those conditions influence its use by plants and animals dependent upon the surface rock and may include significant amounts of adjacent ecological community types.

Small Wetland Communities

Small wetland communities can include vernal pools, seeps, small depression ponds, ephemeral wetlands, beaver ponds, small depression pocosins, interdune ponds, clay-based Carolina bays, limesink depressions, bogs and associated wetlands. Many of these communities are found only in a specific geographical region of the state. All are associated with hydric soils, hydrophilic vegetation, and in general with the presence of water on the surface for at least some portion of the year. By definition these wetlands are small in size but may be extremely important in wildlife value and benefit. The evaluation of each small wetland community should consider not only the land area representing the wetland, but also the surrounding area of influence associated with the wetland. A buffer around the wetland habitat is needed to ensure continued viability of the wetland when determining eligibility for the program. Disturbance and negative land use activities adjacent to the wetland reduces the value of the area to wildlife and can negatively impact the wetland system.

Longleaf Pine Forest

Seven distinct longleaf pine plant communities have been identified in North Carolina: xeric sandhill scrub, pine/scrub oak sandhill, mesic pine flatwoods, wet pine flatwoods, coastal fringe sandhill, pine savanna, and piedmont longleaf forest. Soil moisture ranges from poorly-drained to excessively well-drained. Plant species vary by community type, but all naturally functioning longleaf stands contain native herbaceous ground cover and native grass. Wiregrass is the dominant native grass in the coastal plain south of Highway 264, and certain bluestem species dominate north of Highway 264. Both grasses can be found on scattered sites in the piedmont. Most of the current remnant longleaf forests in North Carolina occur in the coastal plain, but there are significant longleaf restoration efforts underway in the piedmont.

The NCWAP identifies 36 priority wildlife species associated with excessively well-drained longleaf forests. While not identified specifically in the plan, the species associated with wet pine savannah are generally the same. The better-known species are fox squirrel, red-cockaded woodpecker, eastern coach whip, bobwhite quail, and brown-headed nuthatch.

Ground cover is the most important aspect of a longleaf ecosystem while the percentage of longleaf pines in the overstory is less important. Native grasses, forbs, and legumes are components of a naturally functioning longleaf forest. Raking pine straw in a longleaf stand degrades the groundcover and thus reduces the wildlife value of the stand. Raked stands should not be considered functioning longleaf forests for the purposes of wildlife PUV.

The percentage of longleaf overstory can vary in a longleaf stand as long as frequent fire is used to maintain the natural ground cover. Frequent and well-managed fire favors regeneration and growth of longleaf pines and allows the conversion of mixed pine or mixed pine/hardwood stands to stands resembling natural longleaf communities with native ground cover composition. Management with fire, herbicides or mechanical means may be required for land to qualify as wildlife conservation land.