

Red-Cockaded Woodpecker: An Endangered Species

Red-cockaded Woodpeckers (RCWs) are small woodpeckers endemic to open, mature pine forests of the southeast. In 1970 RCWs were listed as Federally Endangered due to drastic population declines from loss of suitable habitat.



Historically, natural occurring forest fires helped to maintain open pine forests that RCWs thrived in. Over time fire suppression and habitat conversion across the landscape greatly reduced the amount of suitable habitat for RCWs. The introduction of prescribed fire as a management tool in southern pine forests has been key to restoring and maintaining RCW habitat, while also benefitting many other species including bobwhite quail and turkey.



DID YOU KNOW?

- RCWs are the only North American woodpecker to create nest cavities in live pine trees.
- RCWs live in family groups of 4-6 birds, consisting of the breeding pair and several male offspring that help raise young.
- Each bird in a group has their own cavity, forming a cluster of cavity trees.



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RED-COCKADED WOODPECKER SAFE HARBOR AGREEMENT





Red-Cockaded Woodpecker

Safe Harbor Agreement

What is a Safe Harbor Agreement?

To encourage landowners with existing or potential RCW habitat to manage their lands to conserve RCW populations, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service implemented a program termed "Safe Harbor". This concept is intended to foster cooperation with landowners rather than resentment, and benefit both endangered species and landowners simultaneously.

A Safe Harbor agreement assures the landowner that restoring or enhancing their land for an endangered species will not result in any new restrictions if there is an increase in the occurrence of endangered species on the land.

RCW was the first species to benefit from a Safe Harbor agreement, when a program was approved and initiated in the Sandhills of North Carolina in 1995. A Safe Harbor agreement for RCWs in Alabama was signed by the USFWS in 2007, and eligible landowners are encouraged to volunteer for the program. The Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division (ADCNR-WFF) is responsible for issuing individual Safe Harbor agreements to landowners in Alabama.

As a participant in Safe Harbor, the landowner signs a Safe Harbor Management Agreement (SHMA) with ADCNR-WFF, which establishes a 'baseline' population of RCW groups present. The baseline can be zero if no RCW groups currently occur on the property, but potential habitat exists that may attract birds in the future. The landowner agrees to carry out activities expected to benefit RCW. If the RCW population expands beyond the established baseline level, no added federal restrictions will be imposed on the landowner. Both the RCW and landowner will benefit from the agreement.

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Landowner Concerns

Many private landowners take pride in managing their forest lands to maintain healthy populations of this rare but interesting species. But some landowners feel threatened by legal responsibilities and restrictions of the Endangered Species Act. However, management techniques are possible that allow continued timber harvest within RCW habitat, while also maintaining habitat suitable for protection of RCW populations. Safe Harbor agreements are voluntary and can be terminated at anytime by the landowner.

Benefits of Safe Harbor

RCW populations will benefit from habitat protection and enhancement, while landowners will be protected from any additional restrictions on timber management or other land uses. The agreement allows landowners substantial flexibility in managing their land. Management of RCW habitat helps maintain a healthy southern pine forest while benefiting other desirable species such as bobwhite quail.

Who can sign up for Safe Harbor?

Landowners with forest lands supporting existing populations of red-cockaded woodpeckers, as well as those with potential habitat, are encouraged to enroll their property in this voluntary program. Potential habitat includes any pine forest – longleaf, loblolly, slash, or shortleaf. There is no minimum size requirement to qualify.



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