



The South Carolina Safe Harbor Program For Red-cockaded Woodpeckers - Frequently Asked Questions



Q. What is South Carolina's Safe Harbor Agreement for the Red-cockaded woodpecker?

A. The South Carolina Safe Harbor Agreement for Red-cockaded woodpeckers (RCW) is a program developed under the federal Endangered Species Act to benefit the conservation of the endangered RCW through voluntary habitat improvements by private landowners.

Q. Why is this agreement important?

A. Safe Harbor is designed to encourage private landowners to undertake actions that will benefit an endangered species. The program provides assurances that no additional regulatory restrictions will result if the landowner is able to increase woodpecker populations on their property.

Q. Is the agreement voluntary?

A. Yes, it is entirely voluntary. The agreement can be terminated with a 60-day written notice.

Q. What happens if the agreement is terminated?

A. RCW management requirements would return to those outlined in the US Fish and Wildlife Service's "Private Lands Guidelines" in the RCW Recovery Plan (2003).

Q. How will the RCW benefit from Safe Harbor?

A. The RCW has been in a long-term decline throughout its range, especially on privately owned lands. Few landowners have undertaken actions that would benefit RCWs due to the liability of harboring endangered species. Safe Harbor reduces ESA restrictions and facilitates management practices that will increase suitable habitat off public lands. These private lands "Safe Harbors" may increase the continuity of suitable habitat for RCWs and may act as a buffer to catastrophic events that may affect populations elsewhere. In the unlikely event that all participating landowners eventually drop out of the program, the result would be to return to conditions that would have existed in the absence of the program.

Q. Who is eligible to participate in the program?

A. Any private property within South Carolina where RCWs are known to occur is eligible to enroll in the program, if the land could provide suitable nesting or foraging habitat for RCWs. SCDNR is particularly interested in entering into cooperative agreements with landowners whose properties contain current, historical, or potential RCW habitat.

Q. What actions will participating landowners be encouraged to undertake?

A. RCWs need older, open pine forests for establishing cavities and for foraging. Many nesting sites (called "clusters") that formerly contained nesting RCWs have been abandoned because oaks and other hardwoods have become established, transforming an open pine forest (which the birds like) into a dense, mixed pine and hardwood forest (which the birds do not like). Landowners can "rehabilitate" these now abandoned sites by controlling hardwood midstory (by prescribed fire, mechanical means, or chemical means), artificially drilling new cavities or installing insert cavities, and placing cavity restrictors over cavity entrances that have been enlarged by other species.

Q. Who provides enhancement activities for RCWs such as drilling artificial cavities and installing cavity restrictor plates?

A. The landowner must contract with qualified woodpecker consultants and/or biologists for these services since SCDNR does not have adequate staff to perform these duties. A list of qualified professionals is available upon request.

Q. Is a participating landowner free to sell his or her land?

A. Yes. A participating landowner is free to sell his land and the Safe Harbor Agreement can be transferred to the new landowner.

Q. Will actions by a participating landowner that cause RCWs to occupy his/her property impose land use restrictions on his/her neighbors?

A. No. The program specifically addresses this issue and provides that habitat improvements carried out under the program will not result in added restrictions on either the participating landowner or their neighbors.

Q. What are the specific steps in becoming a participant in the program?

A. The first step is to contact SCDNR. If they determine that the property could qualify for the Safe Harbor program, the landowner will need to have a qualified consultant (list available upon request) conduct a survey to determine the baseline (the number of RCW groups that currently reside on the property). The landowner agrees to allow SCDNR or its representatives access to the property for confirmation of the baseline and periodic monitoring. The landowner will provide a map or plat of the property, showing RCW cavity tree locations, and listing management activities that will benefit the species. SCDNR and the landowner will then sign a Safe Harbor Cooperative Agreement that will include a "Certificate of Inclusion" which officially acknowledges participation in the Safe Harbor Program.

Q. How are participating landowners assured that the program will protect their interests?

A. The primary objective of the agreement is to encourage voluntary RCW habitat restoration or enhancement activities while ensuring that participating landowners will not incur increased restrictions on their properties because these actions attract more RCWs. While participating landowners will be required to protect any baseline RCWs using the property

(ones present at the initiation of the agreement), they are under no obligation to protect any additional RCWs that may be attracted to the land. Participating landowners will enter into a cooperative agreement with the SCDNR and receive a "Certificate of Inclusion" under a permit that authorizes the future removal, alteration, or elimination of any habitat except that designated for baseline groups. Thus, as long as a landowner carries out the agreed upon habitat improvements and maintains his or her baseline habitat responsibilities, they may develop, harvest trees, or make any other lawful use of the property, even if such use incidentally results in the loss of RCWs or their habitat. The participating landowner must only notify the SCDNR, and give it, its representatives, or the US Fish and Wildlife Service a 60-day notice to relocate any woodpeckers expected to be adversely affected by such actions.

Q. Can landowners sign up for Safe Harbor if they currently have no RCWs on their property but feel birds may move in at a later date?

A. Yes, landowners can sign up with a baseline of "0", assuming that their current management practices benefit the RCW and the property is reasonably expected to attract them. The landowner's obligation will be to agree to at least one enhancement activity on the property, such as prescribed burning.

Q. Will the type of action that this program encourages benefit other species?

A. Yes. The land management practices encouraged by this program should maintain significant plant and

animal species that are associated with the longleaf pine ecosystem and other open pine forests. Game species such as quail will be among the expected beneficiaries. In addition, hardwood control will make it possible for landowners to realize some revenue from harvesting pine straw from longleaf pines.

Q. How will the provisions of the agreement be monitored?

A. The landowner agrees to provide SCDNR, its representatives, or the US Fish and Wildlife Service access to the property for periodic monitoring.

Q. How long will it take to become a participant in the program?

A. The length of time to complete a cooperative agreement with SCDNR and to receive a Certificate of Inclusion in the program will vary depending on the availability of pertinent information. A potential participant can expect 3-6 months to complete the process. SCDNR is committed to working with potential participants to develop cooperative agreements as quickly and efficiently as possible.

For more information about South Carolina's Safe Harbor Program for RCWs contact:

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