

Alabama's Red-cockaded Woodpecker Safe Harbor Agreement: Sehoy and Enon plantations Lead the Way

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Campbell B. "Cam" Lanier has been active in protecting wildlife habitat for many years and was named Conservationist of the Year by the Alabama Wildlife Federation in 2004. More than 18,000 acres of his Enon and Sehoy plantations are currently protected under conservation easements. These mature, open pine lands, expertly managed with prescribed fire for Bobwhite Quail, contain 12,500 acres of suitable Red-cockaded Woodpecker habitat. Three breeding pairs are currently present, and the property could potentially support as many as 50 breeding pairs.

"Enrolling in Safe Harbor was an easy decision for me once I had all the facts," Lanier said. "In a landscape managed for quail, aesthetics, and timber, managing for woodpeckers is something I was already doing."

A Milestone Agreement

Alabama's long-awaited statewide Red-cockaded Woodpecker (RCW) Safe Harbor Agreement was first put into practice when Campbell "Cam" Lanier III enrolled 17,845 acres of Enon and Sehoy Plantations, both located near Hurtsboro, in the program. Lanier hosted the signing ceremony this past March which was held at Sehoy Plantation and included numerous interested landowners as well as representatives of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR), Alabama Forestry Commission (AFC), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Alabama Forestry Association (AFA), Alabama Wildlife Federation (AWF), and Alabama Power Company. The Safe Harbor Agreement signed by Lanier provides a means through which he can manage their lands in a way that benefits the Red-cockaded Woodpecker while ensuring that they will not suffer from increased regulatory requirements should more of these woodpeckers occupy their land. The agreement was a result of 12 years of discussions and negotiations between a scientific steering committee led by ADCNR's Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries (WFF), and the USFWS.

History and Characteristics

The Red-cockaded Woodpecker once flourished in the open, mature pine forests that historically characterized much of the southeastern United States, but because so much of

this habitat has been lost or altered, the species has experienced a drastic decline in numbers. This decline prompted its listing as endangered in 1970, entitling it to federal protection under the Endangered Species Act. The Red-cockaded is the only North



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USFWS Regional Director Sam Hamilton (L) and ADCNR's WFF Director Corky Pugh (R) look on as Alabama Power Company Vice President Willard Bowers signs a Declaration of Intent to enroll Alabama Power lands in Coosa and Chilton Counties into the Safe Harbor Program.

American woodpecker that creates nest cavities in living pine trees, especially longleaf pine but also loblolly, shortleaf, slash, and pond pine. Nesting and roosting cavities are excavated in mature pines usually over 80 years old. The birds do not migrate, but are territorial, usually living in groups of two to six. Groups include a breeding pair and may include male offspring from previous years which help care for new eggs and young. Fewer than 200 groups are known to exist in Alabama, mostly on National Forest lands. While the actual number is unknown, Red-cockaded Woodpeckers probably occur today on no more than a dozen privately owned tracts in the entire state. Each group uses an area of mature pine forest 75-200 acres in size for feeding. Their food consists

Only the male Red-cockaded Woodpecker has the "cockade" of red feathers, and these are often hidden from view. Measuring 8 ½ inches from head to tail, the Red-cockaded Woodpecker is only slightly smaller than the similar and common Hairy Woodpecker.

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The Red-cockaded Woodpecker is the only North American woodpecker that creates nest cavities in living pine trees. With zebra-like stripes on its wings and back, the Red-cockaded Woodpecker also has a distinctive white cheek that can be a noticeable field mark.



WFF Chief Gary Moody addresses the audience during the Safe Harbor signing ceremony on March 29 at historic Sehoj Plantation.

Enon and Sehoj Plantations together comprise 26,150 contiguous acres in Bullock, Macon, and Russell counties. The mature, open and park-like forest is intensively managed with frequent fire for quail, deer, and turkey. This management has preserved and fostered a diversity of plants and animals rarely found on private lands today. In 2005 the Alabama Forest Resources Center was awarded a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Private Stewardship Grant to help recover the woodpecker and the longleaf ecosystem on the property. The habitat is so expansive and of such high quality that significant expansion of the birds across the landscape is possible. This land is strategic for the species' recovery in the region due to its location in a landscape matrix of other large ownerships with suitable habitat including Fort Benning, which already has a substantial population of Red-cockaded Woodpeckers.

mostly of spiders and insects including beetles, ants, roaches, and other insects that occur in or on pines. The foraging area must be open, with scattered, mature pines and few mid-story trees.

A Win-Win for Landowners and Birds

Some landowners have felt threatened by the legal responsibilities and restrictions imposed by the Endangered Species Act when an endangered species occupies their property. Before the Safe Harbor Program, some landowners chose to eliminate potential habitat for Red-cockaded Woodpeckers before their property could support the birds. Essentially, Safe Harbor takes away the fear of government intervention and replaces it with assurances that landowners will not face any additional restrictions if the woodpeckers colonize their property, or if their existing numbers on the property increase. This unique program was designed with input from landowners and private property advocates to be practical and flexible. Landowners retain all private property rights and management flexibility. Land managers are encouraged to use prescribed burning, hardwood mid-story control, pine thinnings, and longleaf pine restoration to improve the land for Red-cockaded Woodpeckers. Landowners enrolled in Safe Harbor are provided free technical assistance and are often given preference in

cost-share programs designed to promote healthy southern pine ecosystems.

In addition to the regulatory and economic certainty that landowners gain through the Safe Harbor program, many express a desire to do their part for the conservation of our natural heritage. Being proud stewards of their land, many landowners enjoy much more than just economic return from their property, and programs like Safe Harbor allow them to do so without fear of government intrusion.

Participating Safe Harbor landowners can now manage their lands for sawtimber, poles, Bobwhite Quail, aesthetics, and pine straw without the fear of attracting or increasing Red-cockaded Woodpeckers and the associated land use restrictions that would otherwise apply. In exchange for the assurances, landowners agree to provide a net conservation benefit to the species. Through Safe Harbor, the Red-cockaded Woodpecker gains essential habitat on private lands that otherwise might be converted to short-rotation pine plantations or agriculture.

The Safe Harbor program has been popular in other southeastern states. Currently 269 landowners throughout the Southeast have enrolled over 621,000 acres of pine habitat in the program, including 617 Red-cockaded Woodpecker groups. Since 1995, at least 57 new Red-cockaded Woodpecker

groups have been created on private land resulting in a significant step forward in recovery of the species, but resulting in no new government restrictions for private landowners. Landowners wishing to manage their lands for open stands of pine timber and potential Red-cockaded Woodpecker habitat should consider enrolling in Safe Harbor.

How to Participate

Any landowner who plans to manage pine forests for extended rotations (more than 30 years) in an open character is eligible for the program. There is no minimum acreage requirement to qualify. The first step is to arrange a site visit with the WFF Division, and then a baseline survey will be conducted by a qualified biologist to “lock in” the number of groups (this can be zero) present at the time of enrollment. Once this baseline survey has been completed, the landowner may enroll in the program.

If you are interested in the Safe Harbor Program, contact Bob Hastings of the Alabama Natural Heritage Program at 334-324-1071 or bhastings@knology.net.

For More Information:

www.fws.gov/daphne/RCW/redcockadedwoodpecker.html

www.fws.gov/daphne/RCW/RCW-SafeHarbor.html

PHOTOS BY ERIC SPADGENSKE, USFWS

Color bands are used to uniquely identify individual Red-cockaded Woodpeckers (RCWs) using a spotting scope. Some RCWs are banded shortly after hatching like this 7-day-old nestling, while others are caught and banded as adults.



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