

The South Carolina Red-cockaded Woodpecker Safe Harbor Program: Partnering with Private Landowners in Endangered Species Conservation

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Abstract: The red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*) (RCW), a species dependent upon mature, fire-maintained pine forests in the Southeastern United States, was listed as endangered in 1970 due to habitat destruction and degradation. With roughly a quarter of RCWs occupying private lands, many landowners were reluctant to maintain habitat attractive to RCWs for fear of Endangered Species Act (ESA) land-use restrictions associated with harboring the birds. The Safe Harbor concept was developed to address this issue: in exchange for voluntary habitat maintenance and enhancement, private landowners are exempted from ESA restrictions for any RCW groups that move onto their property in the future as a result of those habitat improvements. In 1998, South Carolina became the second state to initiate a state-wide Safe Harbor program. Since then, it has grown to include 151 landowner agreements and 299 baseline RCW groups. RCW populations have grown on several Safe Harbor properties; in 2011, 50 above-baseline groups were reported to occur on Safe Harbor-enrolled lands. To encourage and facilitate habitat management for RCWs, SCDNR distributed nearly \$890,000 in cost-share funds to Safe Harbor landowners through the US Fish and Wildlife Service's Landowner Incentive Program. The RCW's compatibility with the Safe Harbor policy, state agency staff dedicated to administering the program, and involvement of forestry and wildlife consultants all contribute to the success of the SC RCW Safe Harbor program. Safe Harbor has also been successful nation-wide, covering 79 species in 23 states and 1 territory, proving a valuable strategy in endangered species conservation on private lands.

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