

Red-Cockaded Woodpecker Recovery



As part of the Safe Harbor Program, 20 endangered red-cockaded woodpeckers (10 male and 10 female) were translocated from the Francis Marion National Forest to three private plantations in Williamsburg County SC. The Safe Harbor Program is a voluntary agreement involving private or other non-federal property owners whose actions contribute to the recovery of species listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The Francis Marion National Forest has the highest concentration of red-cockaded woodpeckers (RCW) in the country with 488 active clusters.

Once found sprawling in 90 million acres of longleaf pine forests in the southeast, the RCW population today numbers about 16,250 birds or 6,500 active clusters across 11 states. The population reduction can be attributed to the declining longleaf pine ecosystem whose footprint has been reduced to three percent of its original expanse.

The RCW and numerous other species have evolved in a landscape that historically received frequent fire in two to three year intervals. The frequency of fire prior to European settlement created fire adapted pine ecosystems in which fire adapted species such as the RCW, eastern wild turkey and eastern diamondback rattlesnake thrived. Today, the most critical land management component for RCW populations is prescribed fire.

The Francis Marion National Forest has supplied RCWs to private, federal and state lands throughout the Southeastern United States since the early nineties. These translocation efforts are designed to either introduce RCWs in areas without an existing population or augment a current population. The goal of dispersing the species across the landscape to increase their conservation potential. The Francis Marion National Forest currently exceeds species recovery goals outlined by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, which allows the forest to act as a donor population. In total, the forest intends to translocate 15 RCW pairs throughout the state of South Carolina by the end of 2017 and plans to continue such recovery efforts in 2018 are taking shape.

