

The little bird with the big reputation RCW Safe Harbor myths and truths

By Kristina Jackson, Florida Safe Harbor Coordinator

The red-cockaded woodpecker, also called the RCW, is a small black-and-white bird that has gained a large, mostly negative, reputation among private land owners because it is protected under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Like other woodpeckers, RCWs excavate holes in trees for their nests. However, they are very fussy about the type of trees they nest in – primarily mature living longleaf or South Florida slash pines. Unfortunately, 97 percent of the longleaf pine habitat they originally inhabited no longer exists. And, much of what still does exist is owned and managed privately.

Many landowners are afraid that if they undertake certain forestry management practices, such as planting longleaf pine trees, going on longer timber rotations, and prescribed burning the RCW may be attracted to their property and in turn they will be limited in how they can use their land because of the bird's protected status. That is why these little birds have a negative reputation and may be despised by those who own large tracts of longleaf pine habitat.

But there is good news for Florida landowners and RCWs. It's called the RCW Safe Harbor - a voluntary program that was developed to alleviate these concerns and provide assurances to landowners who want to be good stewards of their land and improve their wildlife habitat.

In a nutshell, when a landowner enrolls in a voluntary Safe Harbor Agreement, he or she agrees to do good things to benefit the habitat of a listed species. In return the landowner gets assurances that if a listed species moves onto their property, or increases its population above a base line number (how many are there prior to the agreement), the landowner will not be liable for that increase, and will not be subject to additional regulatory restrictions imposed under the Endangered Species Act.

The RCW Safe Harbor program was created to effectively freeze a landowner's Endangered Species Act responsibilities while the owner agrees to restore, enhance or maintain habitat that benefits the little woodpecker. The landowner signs an agreement with the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) to protect existing birds and habitat.

A piece of land with no birds can qualify as well. If additional birds are attracted to the enrolled property, in the event of a future land use conflict, the agreement allows the landowner to have the birds removed.

The first RCW Safe Harbor program was launched in North Carolina in 1995. Since then more than 62,000 acres have been enrolled in the program nationally. Florida became the seventh state to offer the program to private landowners. In 2006, the United States Fish & Wildlife Service and the FWC developed Florida's own RCW Safe Harbor program and entered into a statewide umbrella agreement.

This program meets both state and federal requirements while reducing the paperwork and time necessary to put the agreement into effect.

The minimum acreage for entering into a Safe Harbor Agreement is about 75 acres. Among the best candidates are those who want to maintain old pines on their land for hunting or timber, and those whose property neighbors lands with RCWs already on them.

Myths & Truths

There's been a lot of misinformation circulating about the RCW and the Safe Harbor program. This article will attempt to clarify a few of the most common myths.

Myth #1: Enrolling in an RCW Safe Harbor Agreement means I can no longer cut timber on my land.

This is false. In fact, you may legally harvest timber within occupied habitat as long as you follow certain standards that are designed to avoid harming RCWs.

Those standards include:

- 1) Not cutting down RCW cavity (nesting) trees.
- 2) Conducting timber harvests from August through March when the birds are not nesting.
- 3) Providing the RCW minimal foraging habitat by retaining some larger trees (at least 10 inches diameter breast height) for the bird's habitat. The quality and quantity for foraging habitat is clearly defined in your safe harbor agreement..
- 4) Providing the FWC the opportunity to review a proposed timber sale plan at least 60 days in advance to ensure the plan meets your agreement standards.

Myth #2: RCWs are incompatible with recreation – I will have to eliminate hunting from my land.

This is false. The first landowner to sign up under Florida's Safe Harbor agreement was Dixie Plantation, a 9,000 acre private quail hunting property in Jefferson County. RCWs are relatively human-tolerant birds when it comes to sharing the forested landscape. They are also found on golf courses and foraging in neighborhoods. What they need to survive are older, living pine trees that are managed to minimize or eliminate the shrubby mid-story vegetative growth. Their habitat is much like that of bobwhite quail: open pineland with a nice mix of herbaceous groundcover. Prescribed burning, roller chopping or even using

herbicide treatments are common techniques used to control mid-story growth and yield an aesthetically pleasing park-like, productive pine forest. And that's good for both people and wildlife, including RCWs.

Myth #3: If the government knows I have RCWs they will be traipsing all over my land.

This is false. State and federal biologists and land management folks will not enter your land except at the request of a landowner applying for a Safe Harbor permit. The biologists may request access to your land to assist in or verify your baseline survey (to determine what you already have on your property) prior to you enrolling in the program. FWC biologists may visit your property on an annual basis to assess the status of any RCWs, and verify that the conditions of the agreement are being met. However, per the agreement, reasonable notice of these visits (generally 30 days) is required. Keep in mind that Safe Harbor is strictly a voluntary program. When you enroll in the program the FWC focuses on helping you manage your habitat. We are not there to search for ways to impose regulatory restrictions on your land.

Is Safe Harbor for you?

Safe Harbor takes some of the uncertainty out of managing pinelands in the South. Florida's Safe Harbor Program is sensitive to landowners wanting to use their property for economic benefit or personal use. Managing habitat for RCWs can be compatible with timber harvesting, cattle production or quail management.

FWC staff is eager to work with landowners to develop a plan to enhance habitat that is in line with the owner's land management objectives. We also help you search for financial assistance programs to offset costs of controlled burns or mid-story vegetation removal.

For more information go online to: <http://myfwc.com/safeharbor/>. To see testimonials from landowners who have already enrolled in safe harbor agreements nationally visit <http://www.fws.gov/endangered/newsarchives/2005.html>.

If you have questions or think your land may be a good Safe Harbor candidate, please contact Kristina Jackson, FWC's Safe Harbor Coordinator, at 352-732-1225 Ext. 101 or email kristina.jackson@myfwc.com.