



Technology/Methods

Safe Harbor: Helping Landowners Help Endangered Species

By Ted Toombs

Dougald McCormick and his family have long owned nearly 5,000 acres of longleaf pine forest in the Sandhills region of North Carolina, the area where his ancestors settled in 1791. The McCormicks and other Sandhills landowners found longleaf a good income source not only from timber but also, on many properties, from periodic raking of pine straw, which is sold as landscaping mulch. Historically, frequent wildfires maintained these forests, but now that fires are suppressed, a mature longleaf forest depends on landowners to conduct prescribed burns or mechanically control invasive hardwood understory growth.

These same forests are home to the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker. Management for a mature longleaf forest can create ideal woodpecker habitat and also a dilemma for landowners. The McCormicks and other longleaf landowners long ago realized that allowing their pines to mature and controlling hardwood growth could attract woodpeckers to their property and possibly bring them new land use restrictions. Although improving woodpecker habitat was consistent with their land management objectives, these Sandhills landowners were apprehensive about Endangered Species Act restrictions. So wary was Mr. McCormick that his red truck bore a license plate reading “I EAT RCWS.”

Nearly 10 years ago, these landowners found a new way to practice good stewardship without incurring new legal restrictions when the nation’s first Safe Harbor program was created in North Carolina. Since then, the McCormicks and more than 80 other Sandhills landowners have enrolled a total of nearly 45,000 acres in Safe Harbor agreements with the local US Fish and Wildlife Service office. They have pledged to protect habitat for any woodpeckers that may already be on their property and to restore or enhance habitat that additional woodpeckers may use. In return, they are assured that they will not be subject to any new restrictions if the population of woodpeckers increases on their property.

Those of us who work directly with private landowners may have encountered a similar apprehension toward man-

agement that encourages endangered species. The Safe Harbor program was established with these landowners in mind. The basic idea behind a Safe Harbor agreement is that people who do good deeds shouldn’t be punished for doing them. And so, in a Safe Harbor agreement, a landowner commits to beneficial management for endangered wildlife, usually restoring or enhancing habitat, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service pledges not to “punish” the landowner with additional legal restrictions for those good deeds.

Many endangered species could benefit from such landowner stewardship. More than half the endangered species in the United States depend on private lands for the majority of their habitat, and many of them require active habitat management to thrive. An example is the Utah prairie dog, which needs openings within sagebrush communities to maintain sufficient forage quantity and quality and to provide visibility for predator avoidance. Landowners can help the Utah prairie dog by using prescribed grazing and brush management to reduce sagebrush density and height. Such management creates a mosaic of sagebrush communities with varied ages and structure used by other species. Pledging to carry out such management practices where Utah prairie dogs benefit may qualify landowners to enroll in a Safe Harbor agreement.

Species that inhabit ecosystems that are created by fire or species whose habitats are being destroyed by nonnative weeds are other appropriate subjects for Safe Harbor agreements because landowners can restore or improve conditions for the species through active management. In many cases, the landowner will reap other benefits such as improved livestock forage or improved habitat for game species from this management.

Safe Harbor agreements do not free landowners of their obligation to avoid harming endangered species already on their property. For example, a landowner who currently has Utah prairie dogs cannot destroy that habitat by plowing the field. However, landowners who create new habitat or improve existing habitat will not face any new Endangered

Species Act responsibilities if their management attracts endangered species to the habitat they create or improve.

When used with state or federal incentive programs, such as those provided through the Farm Bill, Safe Harbor agreements can be a powerful tool to encourage landowners to help endangered species. Natural resource managers working with private landowners should become more familiar with this tool so they can advise them on its potential use. Managers should also learn what management actions can benefit endangered species in their area and how such activities can be made consistent with landowners' management objectives. With these tools, we have an opportunity to overcome landowners' reluctance and apprehension toward putting out the welcome mat for endangered species and in the long run make significant gains toward recovering these species. Nationwide, landowners are responding with enthusiasm; hundreds of landowners have enrolled a total of more than 2 million acres in Safe Harbor agreements.

At the 58th Annual Society for Range Management Meeting in Fort Worth, Texas, a half-day session will be dedicated to understanding the benefits and applications of

Safe Harbor agreements by listening to the experiences others have had with the program. The national Safe Harbor program coordinator for the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Julie Moore, will explain how Safe Harbor can be applied in the rangelands context. A discussion will follow the speakers.

For more information on Safe Harbor agreements, contact your local US Fish and Wildlife Service office. Most current agreements are posted in full on Environmental Defense's Web site at the following address: <http://www.environmentaldefense.org/go/incentiveslibrary>. Much of this article was compiled from the organization's publication "Safe Harbor: Helping Landowners Help Endangered Species," which can be obtained on the Web at http://www.environmentaldefense.org/documents/929_handbook.htm.

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