

Draft Notes

North Carolina Sandhills Conservation Partnership

Joint RCW, Reserve Design, and Land Protection Working Group Meeting

Enhancing Communications between Working Groups

1:30 – 4:30 Wednesday, September 5, 2012

Weymouth Woods State Nature Preserve

In Attendance: Bill Parsons, Ryan Elting, Jay Carter, Kerry Brust, Scot Pohlman, Ryan Bollinger, Neville Handel, Jeff Marcus, Jessie Schillaci, Susan Miller, Brady Beck, Mike Schafale, Jeff Walters, John Hammond, Brian Ball, Phil Doerr, Mike Norris, Pete Colwell, Jackie Britcher, Brooke Massa, Nick Haddad

Welcome and introductions (Scott Pohlman)

Reserve Design Overview and Update (Scott Pohlman)

Scott gave an overview of the history of the Reserve Design and what current data layers are being utilized. Ryan Bollinger ran GIS and showed a map the various layers of the RD for the Sandhills. Scott then discussed the Recent RD Connectors and Buffers work that has been conducted in the last year and what needs to be accomplished (i.e. a review of the “Gap” and other important areas) to complete our work. Scott noted that it would be ideal to have the buffers maintained in a way that is compatible with our management goals, but that this is not always possible. Consequently we need to identify and prioritize places where the buffers and connectors are intact and can still be protected to maximize our conservation goals. A discussion was then held about the RDWG and the direction it is taking:

- Question was asked about prioritizing Reserve Design Areas. Mike Schafale stated that corridors and buffer areas identified in RD are important and all SNHAs are top priority. He also noted that land protection is really opportunity driven, so prioritization is not always relevant.
- One aspect of the RD that is incomplete is the Potential Areas layer. It was brought up that we should conduct ground truthing of these potential areas.
- Someone mentioned that there is value to having additional prioritization.
- Jesse asked about what the original intent of developing the reserve design was. Was it to help prioritize purchasing or to help local governments with land use planning? It was a mix of these things and it has been an evolving entity since its’ inception, as we use it for both planning and purchasing, as well as for helping to funnel resources.
- Jeff Marcus suggested the RDWG should finish the connectors and buffers activity

RCW Recovery Update (Kerry Brust and Jay Carter)

In 2011 there were 423 PBG's in the eastern population and 162 PBG's in the western population.

The RCW target corridor in NE Bragg/ Overhills area (focus area 3a) is under intense pressure, though progress has been made up there by TNC and NC Parks in securing a few large and critical pieces. The McCormick tract is the biggest remaining piece of the puzzle up there, but no progress has been made with the current owner and there are no signs that this might change anytime soon. Highway 210 in Spring Lake is seeing a lot of pressure and growth, which is weakening connectivity further and will permanently degrade a lot of habitat between the two areas. Development and mining are happening steadily in this focal area more broadly, with similar impacts. We are seeing a little bird movement between NE Bragg and Overhills, but not much. There are some "jumpers" up there, but the gap of unsuitable habitat is wider than the 3km (male) and 6km (female) foraging range, so regular mixing between birds from these two areas is uncommon. RCW's start to hesitate to cross open fields at around 150m, and will not usually cross an open gap greater than 600 m unless they are a "jumper".

The second focal area discussed was the western corridor linking Blue Farm to the various blocks of Game Lands west of Drowning Creek (focus area 3b). It was suggested that the golf course between block D and block F should be contacted about enrolling in Safe Harbor. The Blue Farm RCW clusters are concentrated in the NE of the tract, but the bottomland has been cut over in the last 6 years and is not currently RCW habitat. Ryan Elting highlighted other acquisitions that are happening and have happened in these corridors. It will be good to re-evaluate the demographic connectivity on both sides of the Gap now to see if there are any noticeable effects of partnership work. Jumpers alone cannot support demographic connectivity between the two populations, so it is critical to restore foraging habitat in this area.

A question was asked about foraging activity through the Green Belt and if birds are using this route when moving between Overhills and NE Bragg. The consensus was that there is probably more jumping up there than foraging-related movement.

The Southwest corridor linking blocks B, C, L, O, Q, J, K, N, M, S and T (focus area 3d) is ambitiously large, but most of this land is in timber so it is feasible. We have been working with some large timber owners to try and protect some of these lands, but we have not made big progress yet. Low development pressure and cheaper land are on our side, but we need to move before these pressures grow, as the benefit of conserving these lands is big. We have yet to find a suitable "swap" property with Jordan Timber, and we have talked about conservation easements with them, but nothing solid has materialized yet. WRC has linked blocks B and T with the acquisition of the Harmon tract and is prioritizing this area because of its value to amphibians.

The feasibility of the Gap corridor (focus area 3c) between Blue and McCain is based on the Blue Farm permanently being protected. We have contacted the Blue Family about a conservation easement and are waiting their response. We also acquired the Bass tract and are working on Five Points as well, in addition to the Connell tract and American Timber property.

The Sandhills East-West corridor (focus area 3e-proposed) should likely shift to the north and west as the population to the west of Pinehurst expands naturally and through cavity provision into these areas. There are about half of the RCW's in Pinehurst now than existed in the 1980's. The Thomas tract deal is nearing completion, and another property to the north could almost complete the lower section of this corridor. DOT's 211 bypass proposal could impact this corridor. Environmental reviews for DOT projects are lacking in that borrow pit and landfilling decision making process is not part of the public review process, and it is dealt with by the contractors. How can we get the reserve design info in the hands of DOT and their contractors? This needs to be a big priority, bigger than it currently is, though our efforts to date have not paid off in big dividends.

- RCW foraging partitions are essentially buffers around a cluster, though not necessarily just a basic measurement (i.e. .5 mile diameter). Partitions with ½ mile buffers do not seem to be appropriate, especially in the SOPI area. The RDWG will meet with Kerry to discuss alternatives to a generic buffer. Jeff also suggested the Foraging partitions will be considered secondary.

The Morgan company tract SE of block C has one active cluster and room for many more. TNC is working with them on restoration of the nicer parts of the property.

What are our next steps? We take our map and try to convey the info we have to local governments, but we need to make it more interactive for our audience. I.E. What are the different connectors and what does each imply? We need to make sure that any info we put out into GGT is as current as possible, and we need to make it easy to work with for our audience. What other values can be conserved in the RCW corridors, and can we make these more explicit?

The proposed Spring Lake Bypass will cut through several RCW clusters in the NE Bragg area, and it is in the feasibility study phase.

The PWC property (SNHA) on south side of Bragg that is managed for water quality might be targeted for ball field construction by city of Fayetteville, so the partnership needs to weigh in on this before any decisions are made. This site has not been inventoried since 1991, so Heritage should try to get out there to update this. This could impact the Green Belt as well.

How to translate RD and RCW Priorities into Land Protection Actions (Ryan Elting)

Ryan proposed scheduling an annual joint WG meeting, as these are a better forum for making sure we are all on the same page and keeping up with each other. All chairs were in favor.

When working with local governments we need to keep them engaged over the long term of the development process to ensure compliance and enforcement of “green” promises and plans made.

We will have a smaller group meeting between RD and RCW, which will consist of: Kerry, Jeff M., Ryan B., and Scott P.

Action Items

- Kerry Brust will be sending out new data layers to Ryan Bollinger. A meeting for updating RD RCW Data will be scheduled for the fall unless it can be handled through email.
- RDWG will schedule meetings for working on RD connectors/buffers layers.

Meeting Adjourned