

Minutes
North Carolina Sandhills Conservation Partnership
Steering Committee Meeting
1:00PM – 4:15 PM Wednesday, December 8th, 2021
CONFERENCE CALL

➤ **Welcome and Land Acknowledgement**

Jeff Marcus began the meeting by welcoming participants and with a land acknowledgement that recognized the historical occupants of the Sandhills. The Native American tribes present before and after European colonization and settlement that were the original inhabitants and stewards of the lands covered by the NCSCP include the Lumbee, the Tuscarora, and the Coharie tribes. We pay our respects to those past, present, and emerging peoples who have long been custodians of the lands and waters of the Sandhills.

The usual round of introductions was not done due to time constraints. Rather the meeting participant introductions were done using 2 breakout sessions. In each session, participants were placed in breakout rooms of 4-5 people. In the first session participants shared one thing they were most proud of for themselves or their organization since the September meeting, and in the second session, participants shared one thing they are most excited about in the coming year.

➤ **Steering Committee Attendance**

Present

Jeff Marcus	TNC
Brady Beck	NCWRC
Pete Benjamin	USFWS
Clyde Sorenson	Sandhills Ecological Institute
Jessie Jordan	NCDPR
Crystal Cockman	Three Rivers Land Trust
Scott Pohlman	NCNHP
Pete Edmonds	Fort Bragg/Training

Other attendees:

Jackie Britcher, Stacy Huskins, & Jessie Schillaci (Fort Bragg ESB); Barry Hull (Fort Bragg DPTM); Alan Schultz (Fort Bragg Wildlife Branch); Dan Hannon (ORISE Fellow); John Hammond, John Ann Shearer, & Lilibeth Serrano (USFWS); Susan Miller & Alice Cohen (USFS); Mike Martin, Jeff Humphries, Tim McFayden, David Mattocks, David Allen, Jeff Hall, Jeff Humphries, Scott Anderson & John Isenhour (NCWRC); John Blanchard (NC Parks); Julian Wilson (NC Forest Service); Debbie Crane, Carmella Stirrat & Colette DeGarady (TNC); Jesse Wimberley (Sandhills PBA); Jeff Bean (NC Museum of Natural Science), Jesse Woodsmith & Melvin Ezzell (Southern Conservation Trust); Dr. J.H. Carter III & Jan Goodson (JCA); Kerry Brust, Jeff Walters, Clyde Sorenson, Anna Prinz, Andy Van Lanen (SEI); Jacob Comer (Quail Forever); Michelle Arnold & Lauren Killian (NC

Audubon); Wendy Dunaway (Fayetteville PWC); Erich Hoffman (Enviva); Alan Weakley (UNC Chapel Hill/NC Botanical Garden); Maya Miller (Cape Fear River Assembly); Lauren Pharr (NC State), Phil Doerr (NC State retired); Landon Russell (Walthour-Moss Foundation); Katherine Thorington (UNC Pembroke); Brian Johnson (Forest Restoration); Sau Silwal (Salem College).

➤ **Speaker and theme introduction** – Jeff Marcus & Dan Hannon, TNC

- The theme of the meeting is a synthesis and overview of 40 years of research projects and monitoring efforts to recover the NC Sandhills population of the federally endangered Red-cockaded woodpecker conducted by partners and collaborators.
- The purpose of the meeting is to distill the lessons learned from decades of academic research and monitoring of Red-cockaded woodpeckers in order to:
 - Identify key takeaways about the state of RCWs recovery, monitoring, and management in the NC Sandhills.
 - Synthesize 40 years of research, monitoring, and management regarding RCW recovery in the Sandhills.
 - Discuss the biggest challenges or knowledge gaps going forward and how down listing to federally threatened may impact the future of conservation work in the area.

➤ **A personal history of 40 years of red-cockaded woodpecker research and management in the North Carolina Sandhills** – Dr. Jeff Walters, Virginia Tech

Introducing the long-term study

Dr. Walters began his talk by providing context to his research work on RCWs which includes the long-term RCW – a dataset that is unmatched in terms of duration and scale.

- The long-term study began in 1978-79 and was initiated by Dr. Jay Carter and Phil Doerr.
- Data collection began in 1980, but the study area and methodology were later finalized in 1983.
- This study is among the longest running and largest spatial scales of any study of birds – especially territorial species like RCWs.

The study spans the recovery period of RCWs

- By the early 1980's RCWs were in rapid decline across their range.
- The species is currently being considered for down listing to federally threatened because 6 populations are “recovered” including the NC Sandhills, and 72% of populations with more than 30 breeding groups are increasing according to data collected in the last ~20 years.
- The study area is ~110,000 hectares (425 mi²) and includes portions of Sandhills Game Land, the western 1/3 of Fort Bragg, Southern Pines & Pinehurst, and minor sites including McCain Forest, Calloway Preserve, Blue Farm, and Camp Mackall.
- The study area held 229 breeding groups of RCWs in 1983 and now holds 354 groups, but this only accounts for RCWs in the study area – not, for example, the western 2/3 of Fort Bragg which hold many more RCW breeding groups.

- The study aimed to involve population monitoring as well as basic and applied research through:
 - Color banding nestlings → fledging success & natal dispersal
 - Complete annual census → survival & dispersal
 - Complete reproductive data → clutch size & nest fates

Phase 1: The early basic research of RCW

When Dr. Walters arrived at NCSU in 1981, RCWs were in serious trouble because:

- No increasing populations being known.
- Management using recruitment stands were failing.
- Fire suppression was widespread and

Dr. Walter's initial interest in RCW were related to conducting basic research on the evolution of cooperative breeding:

- He studied RCW due to their social system, not endangered status
- His interest was primarily in the altruism of helpers in cooperative breeding species.
- The findings of the altruism of helpers' work showed that staying on a territory as a helper was a means to acquiring a high-quality breeding area and that helpers positively benefited fitness of the whole group.
- The explanation for helpers sticking around is that lower quality habitat with a cavity is better than higher quality habitat without any existing cavities, so helpers stick around in hopes of inheriting an area with exiting cavities
- These findings resulted in the idea of recruitment clusters which involved taking unoccupied areas with high-quality habitat, but no cavities, and adding cavities in a "build it and they will come" philosophy of RCW research.

The next stage of the basic research was the recruitment cluster experiment

- 40 sites, 150 acres in size, were selected for the experiment.
- At 20 of the sites, they drilled 2 cavities and 3 "starts" to test the hypothesis. The other 20 sites served as a control and were not manipulated with cavity construction.
- After 2 years of monitoring, 19 out of the 20 experimental cavity sites became occupied by RCW, while the 20 control sites remained unoccupied.
- The outcome of this phase of the study demonstrated that managers could implement this "build it and they will come" approach to increase populations by providing areas for dispersers to set up a breeding territory. However, protecting existing cavities and habitat management through controlled burning would be essential for continued success in maintaining occupancy in existing cavity areas as well as newly occupied recruitment cluster areas.
- Management techniques that came from this study were artificial cavities as well as cavity restrictors designed to reduce cavity destruction by species like pileated woodpeckers.

Phase 2: The applied research of the 1990s

- The new management paradigm of protecting exiting cavities, using recruitment clusters, and implementing controlled burnings were then applied to different RCW populations at both Eglin Airforce Base (FL) and Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune (NC) in the early 1990s (1991-1992).

- At the 2 study sites for the applied research, the populations went from stable/possibly declining, with low numbers of breeding groups at each, to rapid expansion and dramatic increases in population size.
- The Eglin Airforce Base population was declared recovered in 2009 – due in large part to implementation of the new management paradigm resulting from the basic research conducted in the 1980s.
- The new management paradigm became policy by the end of the 1990s and was then codified by USFWS in the *2000 RCW Recovery Plan*.
- The success of these management techniques over the following 2 decades (2000-2020) led to the proposed down listing to federally threatened.
- RCW recovery evolved into ecosystem restoration and management
- RCWs are an umbrella species, so RCW management largely informed the best management practices for ecosystem management.

Human dimensions of RCW recovery

- The recovery efforts of RCW included controversy and conflicts with private landowners and other entities. The conflict was framed as RCW conservation v. property rights, RCW conservation v. military training, and RCW conservation v. timber harvest and timber industry
- During this time the primary driver of timber harvest in NC was proximity to RCW – not profit. This was driven by fears that RCW would move into new areas and landowners wouldn't be able to harvest timber or develop land.
- One key driver of the dissipation of the controversy was the USFWS Safe Harbor Program. The, now widespread, safe harbor program was first developed in 1995 to address the issues surrounding RCW protections in the NC Sandhills.
- The Safe Harbor Program quickly reduced anti-RCW attitudes because landowner property values and ability to pass on property to heirs was guaranteed.
- The program successes include significant decreases in cluster abandonment on private lands due to increased use artificial cavities on Safe Harbor lands
- Another key to the success of the NC Sandhills RCW was the establishment of the NC Sandhills Conservation Partnership, as the gathering and information sharing of the formal partnership between state, federal, and non-governmental organizations fostered a reduction in conflicts between resource managers and conservation entities in the area.
- The RCW Recovery Working Group of the NCSCP resulted in the identification of “the gap” between the Sandhills East RCW population (Fort Bragg & Southern Pines) and the Sandhills West RCW population (Sandhills Game Land & Camp Mackall) which turned into a focus for land acquisition, landowner outreach, and improved management aimed at achieving demographic connectivity between the 2 RCW population of the Sandhills.

Research on movement, dispersal, and landscape connectivity

- Research found 2 modes of juvenile dispersal which showed that forays by juveniles tend to travel further than helpers, but also that dispersing juveniles travelled much further because there are 2 types of juveniles.

- Three modes of dispersal 1) juvenile helper forays; 2) juvenile forays; and 3) juvenile jumper dispersal. The first 2 depend strongly on landscape connectivity; the third does not.
- This further supported the need to improve landscape connectivity in order to connect the Sandhills East and West populations of RCWs.
- In 2010 the RCW Recovery Working Group identified several focus areas for land acquisition, restoration, improved ecosystem management. Many tracts within these focus areas have since been acquired, placed under conservation easement, or entered the Safe Harbor Program which had a direct positive impact on RCW connectivity and population recovery efforts.
- Due to these efforts the Sandhills East and West populations became reclassified as 1 connected population in the USFWS Species Status Assessment.

The future of RCW conservation

- Long-term RCW study serves as a regional resource that can help address future research and management needs.
- New challenges include understanding the effects of climate change, the influence of RCW group density on fitness, and the impact of down-listing.
- Climate change is already resulting in demographic changes to RCW population range wide. Whereas Camp Lejeune's productivity had record highs in 2021, Eglin Airforce Base in Florida experienced its lowest rate of productivity.
- Regional phenomenon where productivity is higher inland and in northern portion of RCW range, and productivity is lower in the southern and southern coastal portion of the range. This highlights that conservation efforts to connect the Sandhills to the Uwharrie Mountain region and reestablishment of RCWs in the Uwharries may become a more pressing need in the future.
- Regarding down-listing, it must be considered that RCW is a conservation reliant species and:
 - Controlled burning must be done in perpetuity to keep RCW populations stable/increasing.
 - Artificial cavity installation is still necessary until suitable forests mature to an age suitable for natural cavity excavation.
 - Timber management may evolve – there could be new understanding for both upper AND lower thresholds for basal area and RCW conservation.

- **Key issues, opportunities, and future considerations for red-cockaded woodpeckers: perspectives from Fort Bragg, NC Wildlife Resource Commission, Sandhill Ecological Institute, and The Nature Conservancy** – Jessie Schillaci, Brady Beck, Kerry Brust, and Jeff Marcus.

Fort Bragg Endangered Species Branch

- Jessie Schillaci began this portion of the meeting by providing a quick history of RCW recovery at Fort Bragg and what the Fort Bragg's plan are moving forward.
 - Fort Bragg is responsible for the vast majority of RCW groups in the region – 288 groups (94%) in 2000, 396 groups (95%) in 2010, and 461 groups (93%) in 2020.

- Fort Bragg’s use of prescribed fire and artificial cavities alongside ecosystem restoration efforts led to a dramatic increase in the number of RCW groups on base from 288 groups in 2000 to 461 groups in 2020.
- Fort Bragg’s plan for RCW monitoring and management in the future includes:
 - Managing landscape with 1 – 3-year fire rotation.
 - Maintaining 4 suitable cavities at all managed RCW clusters.
 - Continuing current monitoring: 100% on western Fort Bragg – Camp Mackall and 33% of the remaining portions of Fort Bragg.
- Jessie posed a question around how down-listing RCW could affect funding for endangered species contract for monitoring, cavity surveys, and fire preparation work around cavity trees.

NC Wildlife Resources Commission

- Across Sandhills Game Land, active clusters are up to 210 in 2021 from 128 clusters in 1992
 - Artificial cavity work in the 90s and 2000s fueled much of the population growth.
 - Timber stands are now reaching the age of maturity suitable for natural cavity excavation, and prescribed fire and timber stand management activities have also been a critical component
 - The increase in Sandhills Game Land acreage from ~55,000 acres to ~65,000 acres over the last 30 years has also influenced the expansion and occupancy of RCWs across the game land.
- Looking towards the future NCWRC plans to:
 - Continue working to establish recruitment clusters in “new” habitat.
 - Expanding acreage through land acquisition work and increasing controlled burn capacity by working with the NC Sandhills Conservation Partnership (TNC land transfers and TNC-WRC burn crews).
 - Managing habitat at RCW recovery standards regardless of down-listing decision, as RCW will likely remain a state listed endangered species.
 - NCWRC is currently working towards a monitoring plan for RCW for 2022 and beyond.
- Brady wrapped up his portion of the talk by showing maps with both Sandhills Game Land boundaries and RCW clusters in 2000 compared to 2010 and to 2020 which showed the expansion of the game land boundary and the increase in active RCW clusters.

Sandhills Ecological Institute

- Kerry Brust focused her portion of the talk on the challenges of RCW recovery on private lands in Southern Pines – Pinehurst (SOPI) and Greater Moore County (MOOR).
 - RCW support populations in SOPI and MOOR includes many private lands such as multiple golf courses, working forests, low density residential areas, and “horse country” like the Walthour-Moss Foundation and vicinity.
 - These areas currently support ~60 RCW groups, but the area is challenged by fire suppression and development.

- The SOPI & MOOR RCW population experience poor recruitment and breeder replacement as well as a continual need for active cavity management (artificial cavity work and restrictor plates).
- Laura also found that Venus flytraps are self-fertile within the same plant – they’re just not self-fertile within a single flower of the multiple flowers an individual flytrap produces in a growing season.
- The challenges faced by RCW populations in SOPI and MOOR are countered by:
 - Translocation along with extensive cavity work (artificial cavities and protecting existing cavities)
 - Safe Harbor Program provides significant positive impacts to maintaining RCW populations in the SOPI and MOOR areas.
 - Controlled burning where possible on the Walthour-Moss Foundation, Weymouth Woods State Park, and some private working forests are critical to maintain RCW in the SOPI and MOOR areas.
- Kerry wrapped up her portion of the talk by discussing the future of RCWs as related to SOPI and MOOR. Keys to future success include:
 - Continued efforts to support and expand the Safe Harbor Properties as well as the Sandhills Prescribed Burn Association.
 - Potential for a SOPI/MOOR “jumper” to reestablish RCW in the Uwharries.
 - Continuing artificial cavity work and cavity protection efforts.

The Nature Conservancy

- Jeff Marcus wrapped up the featured speaker portion of the meeting with considerations and discussion points for the future of RCW in the Sandhills including:
 - How should management change when RCWs reach or exceed carrying capacity.
 - An important next step for the future of the species in the region include inter-landscape connectivity, i.e., connecting the NC Sandhills to the SC Sandhills, Bladen Lakes region, and the Uwharries.
 - What will be the impact of future tank ranges and other land clearing on Fort Bragg?
 - What is the outlook for USFWS presence in the Sandhills and how might this affect proactive (Safe Harbor) and reactive work by USFWS around RCW conservation?

Group Discussion

- The first discussion point was related to the USFWS presence and future work in the Sandhills. Pete Benjamin (USFWS) responded by highlighting the successful recovery work in the Sandhills, mainly through the partnership, and how this work overcame the many of the challenges faced in the early days (1980s – early 2000s). During the last 30 years USFWS staff, funding, and attention has been focused on RCWs, but with the achievements discussed throughout today’s talk, USFWS in the southeast is now focused on other species (aquatic species & red wolves), landscapes, and ecological systems (aquatic systems through the southeast) that are much worse off than RCW and the NC Sandhills. Pete also highlighted how the RCW

management paradigm and the species status as an umbrella species has evolved into an ecosystem conservation paradigm.

- Jackie Britcher (Fort Bragg – ESB) discussed how a change in status to RCWs will change the funding and prioritization of management, not only RCW management, but also longleaf ecosystem management, as many know the RCW recovery focus has driven much of the successful work over the last 30 years. The question posed off this was “how will the down-listing and 4-D rule impact on the ground conservation?”
 - Pete Benjamin responded by explaining the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and what changes from a regulatory perspective when a species is down listed from endangered to threatened:
 - All protections from *Incidental Take* that apply to endangered species (prohibiting harm, harassment, and alteration of habitat) don’t apply to threatened species with the exception of the restrictions and regulations associated with the 4-D rule which can include specific language on what sections of the ESA
 - The proposed 4-D rule is still under consideration, and the final rule could include:
 - Accepting the proposed 4-D as written.
 - A revised proposed 4-D with more strict or less strict regulation for RCW.
 - A withdrawal of the proposed down listing and maintain RCW as endangered.
 - Jay Carter provided the last comments in the RCW discussion by discussing how RCW groups in high density RCW areas tend to share home ranges; this means there are additional resources for 2 or more groups, but there’s also more conflict between groups. If a development or land use change project occurs in a given area, the RCW partition data may only indicate impacts to a low number of groups, but given the density dependent sharing of resources, the impact may be much greater than what an ecological assessment based on partitions would indicate.
- A video recording of the featured speaker portion is located at the links below
- <http://www.ncscp.org/members/members.html> - this link is password protected. Please reach out to Dan Hannon or Jeff Marcus for the username and password to the NCSCP.org page that hosts the video
 - The featured speaker portion video, full video, and slide decks for speakers and working group updates can all found here: <https://tnc.box.com/s/9h6ynosbgo4etkr8c79dv2hc92eexkhd>
 - If anyone has issues accessing any of the videos or slideshows, please reach out to Dan Hannon (Daniel.Hannon@tnc.org – 845-820-6346) or Jeff Marcus (jmarcus@tnc.org – 910-246-0300) or assistance.
- Working Group Reports and Discussion
- **Resource Management** (Jessie Jordan)

- Jessie reported on the first field trip of the reformed Resource Management Working Group. The group went to TNC's Calloway Preserve to visit several wetland sites including:
 - 2 upland depressional wetlands that TNC and WRC worked together to restore the hydrology towards making the sites more suitable for rare amphibians.
 - A Saint Francis' Satyr restoration research project that included combinations of 3 treatments (impounding, thinning, and burning) as well as planting.
- The plan for the future is to do such outings about 2 times per year, but the specific date for the next trip has yet to be planned.
- As TNC's Flail-Vac is currently down for wiregrass seed collection, WRC may be lending state parks their Flail-Vac to assist state parks seed collection goals.

- **RCW Recovery** (Kerry Brust)
 - No update

- **Communications** (Debbie Crane)
 - Debbie is soliciting new members and assistance for reinvigorating the Communication Working Group. Please reach out to Debbie (dcrane@tnc.org) if you are interested in participating in the group.

- **Land Protection** (Jeff Marcus)
 - A large portion of the 4,099 acres of the Walthour-Moss Foundation was recently protected with a US Forest Service Conservation Easement.
 - The easement is expected to protect the property from the threat of a US-1 bypass
 - The property is among the best private land longleaf communities in the Sandhills and provides habitat for a multitude of rare plants and animals.
 - US Forest Service used the USDA Forest Legacy Program to enact the conservation easement for protecting an identified environmentally important forest.
 - The project was accomplished through strong collaboration effort within the Partnership and included TNC, The Walthour-Moss Foundation, and The US Forest Service
 - Landon Russell spoke to importance of this property and Susan Miller discussed the NC Forest Service Forest Legacy Program
 - The Blue Farm, which has been a top conservation priority for the Partnership, was recently acquired by 130 of Chatham - a private entity with the intention of managing the ~3400 acre property for the longleaf pine ecosystem and restoring agricultural portions of the property back into longleaf and other natural communities that occur on the property. Although there are no formal legal protections for the Blue Farm, 130 of Chatham has expressed the intention to manage the property for conservation and habitat. Melvin Ezzell

spoke to process for the acquisition and Brian Johnson spoke about plans for management.

- Three Rivers Land Trust announced its recent success in getting ~6 million dollars of funding for 11 projects approved by the NC Land and Water Fund. Several of the projects are in the Sandhills and/or the Sandhills – Uwharrie Connector Area.
 - Bennett Little River – 88 acres of hardwood forest with significant river frontage on the Little River which flow through Fort Bragg and connects to the Cape Fear River. This site will be a fee-simple acquisition by TRLT.
 - Liner Properties – 61 acres of hardwood forest in Randolph County near the Montgomery County line. The intention is to transfer this property to the US Forest Service to add to the Uwharrie National Forest.
 - Coggins – 8-acre landlocked inholding within the Badin Rection Area of Uwharrie National Forest in Montgomery County. This tract will also be transferred to the US Forest Service in the future.
 - Cranford – 87-acre donated conservation easement with a great deal of river frontage on the Uwharrie River.
 - Webster – 40-acre donated conservation easement in Whispering Pines, Moore County with a large portion of property contain Heron Lake.
- NCWRC covered recent land transfers from TNC to NCWRC:
 - The ~124-acre Usher tract and the ~15 acre Lawrence tract that each share boundaries with Sandhills Game Land was recently transferred from TNC to NCWRC to add to Sandhills Game Land.
- **Reserve Design** (Dan Hannon)
 - A brief update was provided on the work the Reserve Design Working Group has been involved with to update and add conservation data layers to Fort Bragg’s Regional Land Use Advisory Commission landscape rating system and project review guidelines that apply to the 5-mile buffer around Fort Bragg – Camp Mackall.
 - TNC worked with NCNHP to draft a proposal for conservation data updates and additions as well as guidance on their project review process and the resulting recommendations that relate to develop and land use change within the RLUAC boundary.
 - The proposal has been submitted to the RLUAC board, and it is currently being considered for future implementation.

➤ Partner Updates

NC Forest Service – Julian Wilson

- Julian Wilson is the new longleaf coordinator for NCFS

NC Parks – Jessie Jordan

- Jessie shared an update on the restoration work at the Boyd Tract at Weymouth Woods. A timber stand improvement (TSI) project recently wrapped up on this important old growth longleaf portion of the park, and NC Parks will be following up this effort by planting 18 boxes of wiregrass plugs in the recently thinned areas.
- At the Sandhills Tract of Carver's Creek, a large patch of young loblollies was cleared out of a sandhills seep to open up and improve the hydrology of the seep.

TNC – Carmella Stirrat, Jeff Marcus, & Debbie Crane

- TNC is currently in the process of hiring their seasonal burn crews, and Carmella Stirrat shared that there will be 10 position available, with 1 newly created position for a burn crew member that will split their time between the Sandhills of NC and the Minnesota TNC burn crew.
- TNC is still looking for a Fire Program Manager to replace the recently retired Margit Bucher.
- TNC recently completed timber work and site preparation for planting native warm season grasses at TNC's Griffin Preserve (~450 acres adjacent to the Blue Farm).
- Fire in the Pines Festival, Saturday October 8th and Sunday October 9th in Wilmington, is now a hybrid virtual and in-person event

Three River Land Trust – Emily Callicut

- No update

Quail Forever – Jacob Comer

- Quail Forever shared that USDA NRCS announced a EQIP eligibility document completion deadline for January 14th, 2021 – private landowners who have signed up for EQIP must have these documents submitted by this date or they will not be eligible for funding. For the CSP program, sign-up is currently ongoing.

USFWS – John Ann Shearer, John Hammond, & Pete Benjamin

- John Ann gave a plug for the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program to fund landowners that want to manage and restore high-quality wildlife habitat.
- The NC Longleaf Honor Roll landowner program has recently recognized The Studenmund family and will soon be recognizing Alison Ives for their excellence in longleaf pine management.

SEI – Kerry Brust, Clyde Sorenson, Jeff Walters, Andy Van Lanen, and Anna Prinz

- No update

Fort Bragg DPTM – Barry Hull

- No update

Fort Bragg ESB – Jackie Britcher

- No update

Fort Bragg WB – Alan Schultz

- No update

NCWRC – Brady Beck, Mike Martin, David Mattocks, Jeff Hall, Jeff Humphries, & Gabriella Garrison

- David Mattocks provided an update on recent work he and Tim McFayden have completed concerning timber marking for upcoming thinning projects on Sandhills Game Land. They've also worked to collect 30 bags of wiregrass seed on Sandhills Game Land in the week leading up to the meeting. WRC is looking

forward to working with TNC's 2022 four-person burn crew with the hopes of catching up on some acreage in need of burning that were missed in previous seasons due to COVID

- Mike Martin gave an update on work related to WRC herpetofauna projects including:
 - The number of southern hognose hatchlings observed in the fall 2021 survey season were improved from last year's numbers.
 - Northern pine snake and coachwhip detections, however, were low this year.
 - Many of the most important winter breeding amphibian wetlands on Sandhills Game Land are at their lowest water level since Hurricane Florence in 2018.
 - Mike has been working with Nathan Shepard (NCNHP) and Dan Hannon (TNC/USFWS) to formulate a plan for identifying and surveying sites with potential to act as breeding locations for amphibian species of greatest conservation need (SGCN) as well as brainstorming ways to collate, synthesize, and summarize the data and survey work from the last several years of NCWRC amphibian monitoring efforts.

USFS – Susan Miller & Alice Cohen

- Susan introduced Alice Cohen who will be working for the US Forest Service as a Forest Partnership Specialist based in Asheville to coordinate with government and non-government partners across all 4 national forests in NC.
- Alice Cohen introduced herself and expressed appreciation for the NCSCP. She provided her email for anyone that wants to reach out to her:
alice.cohen@usda.gov.
- Susan provided an update on USFS activities including wildfire details out west and hurricane related damages in Pisgah National Forest.
- The NC Wildlife Society is offering a tree ID hike on Uwharrie National Forest on Tuesday September 28th and registration can be completed through Eventbrite.

NCNHP

- No update.

Sandhills PBA – Jesse Wimberley

- Jesse gave a shout out to the featured speakers and acknowledged the role that the scientific inquiry and monitoring has had in providing data and evidence to support controlled burning effort in the region over the last 30 years and how this has influenced the fire culture of both public and private land managers in Sandhills in a positive way.
- The Hoke County Community Forest timber thinning project is now off the ground in efforts to restore the longleaf pine communities on site, provide revenue for the county, and serve as a teaching forest for private landowners and community members in an underserved county.
- The PBA did a late-October burn at Hoke Community Forest in an attempt to experiment with pushing the burn window to include fall burns as well as dormant and growing season burns to expand the capacity for burning on private lands.

Jay Carter & Associates – Jan Goodson

- No update

NC Museum of Natural Science– Jeff Bean

- NCMNS continues to radiotrack northern pine snakes on Sandhills Game Land.

Southern Conservation Trust– Melvin Ezzell

- The understory management program at Nick’s Creek Longleaf Reserve has gotten underway since the September 2021 meeting. To date ~250 acres of understory restoration through mechanical treatment/removal.
- About 12-15 miles of firebreaks have been constructed to establish burn units throughout Nick’s Creek, but rain is needed to increase the moisture of the duff layer prior to burning, as much of the site has not experienced fire in ~50 years.
- In other news from Southern Conservation Trust, the land trust has recently taken ownership of several conservation easement in eastern NC – further expanding their conservation activities in the state.

RLUAC

- No update
- The next meeting will be a Joint NC LIT meeting with the NCSCP, Cape Fear Arch Conservation Collaboration, Onslow Bight Conservation Forum, and the NC Longleaf Coalition. The meeting will take place on **Wednesday March 9th, 2022 from 10:00 am – 3:00 pm**. The meeting will cover several projects that cross the LIT boundaries including talks on Red-cockaded woodpeckers, Venus flytraps, Saint Francis’ Satyr, The State of NC Longleaf Occurrences and Habitat Quality, TNC’s longleaf road map, and updates on Prescribed Burn Associations in southeast NC. The meeting will take place on Zoom, and an agenda, zoom link, and meeting invitation will be shared in coming weeks.