

Minutes
North Carolina Sandhills Conservation Partnership
Steering Committee Meeting
1:00PM – 4:00PM Wednesday, June 16th, 2021
CONFERENCE CALL

- **Welcome and Introductions**
- **Steering Committee Attendance**

Present

Pete Edmonds	Fort Bragg/Training
David Heins	Fort Bragg/ED
Jeff Marcus	TNC
Brady Beck	NCWRC
Pete Benjamin	USFWS
Brian Yeich	NCFS
Clyde Sorenson	Sandhills Ecological Institute
Jessie Jordan	NCDPR
Scott Pohlman	NCNHP

Absent

Crystal Cockman	Three Rivers Land Trust
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Other attendees:

Jackie Britcher, Jessie Schillaci (Fort Bragg ESB), Barry Hull (Fort Bragg ACUB), Monica Stephenson, Alan Schultz, Robert Fleming (Fort Bragg DPW), Randy Franklin (Fort Bragg Community Planning), Rex Badgett (NCDOT), Dan Hannon, Rhonda Sturgill (ORISE Fellows), John Hammond, John Ann Shearer, Caroline Krom (USFWS), Susan Miller (USFS), Kacy Cook, Mike Martin, Jeff Humphries (NCWRC), Debbie Crane, Carmella Stirrat, Gretchen Coll, Deb Maurer (TNC), Pete Campbell (RLUAC), Jesse Wimberley (Sandhills PBA), Jesse Woodsmith, (Southern Conservation Trust), Melvin Ezzell (consulting forester), Jay Carter (JCA/SEI), John Blanchard (NCDPR), Emily Callicut (Three Rivers Land Trust), BJ Grieve, Reagan Parson (Town of Southern Pines), Deb Ensminger (Moore County Planning), Jacob Comer (Quail Forever), Jason Epley (Benchmark Planning), Mark Locklear, Landon Chandler, Jay Sikes, Sarah Arbor (Harnett County Development Services), Danielle Orloff (Town of Aberdeen).

- **Current land use trends and implications for future conservation and military training impacts in the NC Sandhills – Jason Epley, Benchmark Planning**
 - Jason Epley of Benchmark Planning recently completed the Fort Bragg Joint Land Use Study (JLUS 2018) and JLUS implementation which aims to integrate military and conservation considerations into the regional land use planning in order to facilitate cooperation between military installations and local communities in an effort to achieve compatible growth and long-term sustainability of military training missions.

- The military’s ability to train is affected by development, noise, endangered species, commercial airspace within 5 miles of Fort Bragg and Camp Mackall, and the 2018 JLUS sought to inform Fort Bragg and RLUAC as to current and future land use compatibility issues in counties and municipalities within the 5 mile buffer.
- The key findings of the 2018 JLUS include
 - the Sandhills region is continuing to grow in population, with the exception of Richmond and Scotland counties, but this trend is expected to decrease for Cumberland County whereas Moore County is projected to continue increasing in population.
 - The greatest concentration of land cover change of undeveloped to developed around Fort Bragg occurring along NC 690 in Moore County, NC 24/87 in Harnett County, and eastern Hoke County along US 401.
 - Although training restrictions around red-cockaded woodpecker foraging areas have eased, Fort Bragg is still under a biological opinion regarding continues restoration and maintenance of potential breeding groups (PBGs).
 - NCSCP partner including government agencies, NGOs, and private landowners have worked together to preserve thousands of acres within the study area and throughout the region through conservation easements and fee-simple acquisitions.
 - New noise contour study revealed no significant increase in noise associated with changes to Fort Bragg’s training mission, but some noise concerns do extend off the base’s boundaries in Moore County and areas around Fayetteville.
 - The western portion of Hoke County and areas of Scotland County that lay in the corridor between Fort Bragg and Camp Mackall is a vital area of concern regarding Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) training.
- From the study, 29 recommendations were developed with consideration to regional coordination, compatible growth, environmental protection, and Fort Bragg. Focusing on compatible growth, the recommendations included a compatible use protection rating which RLUAC utilizes to assess land use change and rezoning proposals for review by Fort Bragg; ratings include “critical” and “important” lands.
 - Critical – high decibel noise contours, RCW active foraging areas, and UAS corridor area.
 - Important – large caliber noise, areas under aviation corridors, and BWhA rating of 7+, and high quality/outstand resource waters.
- RLUAC has recently updated their website and completed work on several tools for land use planners in region including a new case review and tracking system, new GIS layers, and a new strategic plan

- **The role of RLUAC in regional land use planning and the resources available to implement RLUAC policies into planning strategies – Pete Campbell, RLUAC**
 - RLUAC was formed in 1991 based on the first JLUS of the Fort Bragg – Camp Mackall area; the committee that formed was the first of its kind in attempting to coordinate military planning with local community planning.
 - RLUAC is actively using the 2018 JLUS information and tools to evaluate land use changes around the installations and to increase engagement from RLUAC members.
 - RLUAC is focused on fostering economic development opportunities from a military standpoint as well as the surrounding communities while balancing environmental issues, civilian safety, and military training concerns.
 - One major challenge for RLUAC and its members is increasing public awareness of compatibility growth issues.
 - RLUAC represents Fort Bragg to review local government land use changes and proposals within the 5-mile buffer around Fort Bragg and Camp Mackall; this process is mandated by state statute, but RLUAC recommendations are non-binding.
 - The new strategic plan includes sections focused on communication, education, engagement, collaboration, and assistance.
 - RLUAC holds quarterly meetings for members, local planners and government officials, and other interested stakeholders which provides a good forum for information sharing. Information on meetings and access to tools like GIS data can be obtained from the RLUAC website (www.rluac.com) or by contacting Pete Campbell (director@rluac.com) or Jason Epley (jepley@benchmarkplanning.com)

- **Implementing the Green Growth Toolbox to support land use planning decisions – Kacy Cook, NC Wildlife Resource Commission**
 - The GGT is a non-regulatory guide and technical assistance program to integrate priority wildlife habitat conservation in local government land use and transportation planning.
 - The goal of GGT is to bridge the gap between the knowledge held by biologists and the knowledge of land use decision makers to foster conservation-based solutions to issues of land use and development.
 - The National Association of Home Builders has a policy validating the goals of the GGT program in that cluster, mixed use, high density, and transit-oriented development are encouraged.
 - The GGT is accompanied by a handbook and conservation GIS data. The first step in implementing the GGT is by accessing and reading the handbook.
 - GGT offers training workshops to provide training and technical assistance for local governments and land use planners beginning to implement the GGT approach

- GGT has dedicated funding to provide to local governments in order to develop conservation-based plans and ordinances.
- GGT is all about minimizing impacts to wildlife and habitat connectivity while allowing for development needed in a given area.
- Kacy recommended incorporating habitat conservation maps in each county's clearinghouse of GIS data.
- Examples of successful green growth were given including:
 - Randolph County, where developers were allotted extra lots to develop if they maintained 50% of the site as wildlife habitat.
 - Carteret County, after collaborating with WRC on a Partners for Green Growth project, developed a story map on the importance of green infrastructure.
- GGT recommendations
 - ID all different land use districts
 - Specific what types of development is preferred or discouraged within each land use district.
 - Encourage high density development: build up not out.
- The benefits of green growth examples:
 - In 10 subdivisions in South Carolina, developers saved 36% by doing conservation development rather than conventional design.
 - Homes built within/around high-quality natural areas sell for up to 26% more than homes built without maintaining these areas.
 - Sprawling development patterns are more costly for both developers and taxpayers – taxes can be 2x as high, 38% higher infrastructure costs, higher maintenance costs, and high costs for public services
- GGT Success stories:
 - GGT worked with the town of Aberdeen to update their land use plan, and the town adopted the recommendations of the GGT.
 - Moore County worked within the sustainable growth strategy and GIS data from the sustainable Fort Bragg project to do their public utilities and cell tower ordinance updates.
 - Pinehurst used the GGT in their land use plan.
- Information on training workshops, technical guidance documents, GIS data layers, and funding assistance can be found at <https://www.ncwildlife.org/conserving/programs/Green-Growth-Toolbox>

➤ **How Harnett County implements military and conservation considerations in land use planning and policy – Mark Locklear, Harnett County Planning**

- Residential growth has been dramatically increasing in several portions of Harnett County for the last 10 years.
- Unlike some other counties in the Sandhills regions, Harnett County's elected officials are encouraging growth, so Harnett County planners are working to encourage policies that fosters wise growth.

- The county currently has 61 new or continuing developments, with over 10,000 lots that are under some phase of review, and these will contribute about 26,000 new residents and over 100,000 new vehicle trips in Harnett County.
- From a conservation effort standpoint, the county has been working to conserve habitat for a long time.
- Even though the development rate and number of lots has increased dramatically in recent years, over 1,000 acres of open space and wildlife habitat has been conserved by offering density bonuses and conservation subdivisions as an option for development proposals.
- For nearly 20 years, the zoning GIS layer includes a “conservation land” component, and these areas are zoned as conservation lands; this allows for only very minimal growth or development in those areas.
- The county has setbacks or buffers of 500 feet of the Cape Fear River and 300 feet of the Black River, with all other rivers and streams having a 200-foot buffer within which no development is allowed.
- The County’s 2015 land use plan study included identification of:
 - Protected areas
 - Environmental sensitive areas
 - Fort Bragg 5-mile buffer
- In regard to military focused land use planning, the 5-mile buffer accounts for ~83,000 acres in Harnett County, and Harnett County has worked with RLUAC in this area for a number of years in order to ensure that what the county is doing is compatible with Fort Bragg’s training mission and ensure the county is kept up to speed on the changes in Fort Bragg’s training mission needs.
- Harnett County incorporated in their UDO a notification system for developments and projects within the 5-mile Fort Bragg Buffer to help alert developers and residents that the area may be subject to military training activities.

➤ **How Moore County is addressing growth and land use planning and policy – Deb Ensminger, Moore County Planning**

- Moore County operates on the philosophy that they do not exist on an island – every decision made effects Moore County residents, local economies, natural resources, neighboring counties, and the military.
- Moore County’s populations has also expanded dramatically in recent years, and the largest contributor to that growth is the military population; reason cited for increased population is the education system and quality of life benefits of living within Moore County.
- Collaboration and work with GGT, RLUAC, and the Joint Land Use Study has been among the most important aspects of a land use planning approach that successfully balances development, conservation, and military interests.
- In 2019 the commissioners changed their development guidance towards pushing projects closer to or within established towns.

- Where development has occurred in the 5-mile Fort Bragg buffer, Moore County also notifies new homeowners that their property lays within a military training area and may be subject to all that this implies (noise).
- **The NC Sandhills Conservation Partnership’s vision for the future of conservation-based land use planning – Jeff Marcus, The Nature Conservancy**
- Jeff Marcus summarized the meeting and facilitated a discussion about the presentations and speakers involved in the meeting.
 - Jeff posed a question to the land use planners in the meeting about how the conservation community can help land use planners improve their efforts.
 - One participant highlighted a recent effort in which they involved a local high school’s environmental club which eventually attended a county board meeting to present their thoughts and concerns to the commissioners.
 - One participant suggested that involvement in local politics is key. Every commissioners meeting includes at least 3 minutes of open forum where attendees can present thoughts, questions, and concerns to the county board of commissioners.
 - Another participant expanded on the importance of political activity not just at the local level, but also at state level that would be important to change some of regulatory processes and policies that emanate from relationships with state officials.
 - Kacy Cook proposed that one tool would be Transfer of Development Rights programs like those adopted by Chapel Hill. The military and local governments could be the right partnership of groups to approach the general assembly and get buy-in.
 - Pete Benjamin proposed that if more of the citizenry was educated on the natural resource value of the Sandhills and the driver of most local economies (Fort Bragg), maybe the way they vote or lobby their elected officials would be more tuned in to the needs of natural resource conservation and military training. Perhaps better messaging and public outreach campaigns within our own organizations could foster a more grassroots community level support in changing ordinances and policies.
 - Susan Miller added that the Forest Services just held a meeting for all District Rangers across the country to roll out a guidebook for working with county governments (accessible here: [USFS Guide to working with county governments](#)). Another avenue might be to use Sentinel Landscapes as a program by which advocacy for changes in land use planning would be effective – not only in the Sandhills, but throughout the NC Sentinel Landscape.
 - Debbie Crane offered to spearhead and work with other in the Partnership to develop some more concerted messaging campaigns to connect the economic side of development to the conservation and military impacts of development.

➤ Working Group Reports and Discussion

- **Resource Management** (Brady Beck)
 - There's currently an interest in reviving the Resource Management Working Group. Brady Beck is currently serving as the chair of this working group, but Jessie Jordan (NC Parks) has expressed an interest in taking over to chair this group and starting to work within the Partnership to increase the level of collaboration and information sharing on resource management topics via informal meetings and field trips.
- **RCW Recovery** (Kerry Brust)
 - On a regional level, the 2021 nesting monitoring showed a much-improved nesting season than 2020.
 - The primary core population on Fort Bragg and the essential support population on Sandhills Game Land accounts for ~80% of all of our Sandhills groups; these groups have demonstrated much fewer nest failures, more re-nests, larger brood sizes, and slightly higher fledging success.
 - SEI and others are still actively banding nestlings and documenting re-nests in the region.
 - On TNC's Calloway Tract, County Club of NC, Pinehurst, and western Moore County, there has been more nest failures. In some areas this might be caused by a higher number of solitary birds that aren't nesting due to locally low levels of recruitment. On Calloway, this may be an effect of density-dependent reproductive success.
 - As of the end of May 2021, there 75 more nestlings banded on Fort Bragg compared to the same time last year.
 - Kerry will have more detailed information and RCW recovery data ready for the September 2021 meeting.
- **Communications** (Debbie Crane)
 - Debbie reiterated her interest in working within the Partnership to develop more concerted messaging campaigns. Debbie suggested attendees interested in working with her on this effort contact her to either offer support or connect her with other colleagues that may be more appropriate for assisting with this effort.
 - Party for the Pine 2022 has set a date of April 23, 2022.
 - Debbie also shared 2 media pieces directly related to the NCSCP:
 - The Washington Post wrote a story on pine straw raking featuring quotes from TNC's Jeff Marcus that can be found [here](#)
 - TNC was recently shadowed by a reporter from the Washington Post who is working on a story about the difference in fire management and wildfire between the western and southeastern United States. The story is still being written but will be shared when published.

- **Land Protection** (Jeff Marcus)
 - No closings have occurred since the last meeting, but TNC and Three River Land Trust continue to work on a number of projects, including some transfers to NCWRC.
- **Reserve Design** (Dan Hannon)
 - No update, but Dan Hannon expressed an interest in re-running the reserve design analysis and mapping exercise.
 - Dan called for assistance and guidance in working on the data layers and analyses that went into the Reserve Design map.

➤ **Partner Updates**

NCSU/SEI Parks – Clyde Sorenson

- A new PhD student at NCSU, Lauren Pharr, has began her research looking at the links between climate change and RCW brood reductions. Her website can be accessed [here](#).

NC DOT – Rex Badgett

- DOT is planning on putting in multiple wildlife crossing between Aberdeen and Raeford during the NC 211 widening project. These underpasses will increase habitat connectivity and decrease the negative impacts of the NC 211 widening project.

NC Parks – John Blanchard & Jessie Jordan

- Jessie announced that prescribed fire was currently underway at Carver's Creek at the time of this meeting
- Recently finished a habitat foraging analysis for RCW on the Long Valley Tract
- NC Parks is looking for potential sites at Carver's Creek for reintroduction of Saint Francis satyr
- Weymouth Woods is beginning to hold volunteer days again after these field days were temporarily put on hold due to COVID-19

TNC – Carmella Stirrat & Debbie Crane

- TNC is currently concerned about the amount of/changes to development patterns around TNC preserves like Calloway Forest
- A northern pine snake was recently found in the far northeast portion of the preserve; it's believed to be a different snake than the one recently observed by Kerry Brust in the southwest portion of the preserve.
- Restoration work is continuing on TNC's Jordan Preserve and Griffin Preserve
- The TNC fire crew will be wrapping at the end of next week (June 25th), but the WRC crew will be continuing to burn.
- Debbie Crane updated the Partnership on the pending retirement of TNC's fire manager, Margit Bucher, who has been instrumental for TNC's fire program in NC for many years.

Three River Land Trust – Emily Callicut

- No update

Quail Forever – Jacob Comer

- Quail Forever has started funding landowners through EQIP.
- They're currently working on getting landowners funded through the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

USFWS – John Ann Shearer & Pete Benjamin

- USFWS has 2 newly listed species in NC (Carolina madtom - endangered and Neuse River waterdog – threatened), although, these species do not occur in the Sandhills.
- John Ann Shearer gave an update on the continued work of the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program in the Sandhills.
- In collaboration with NC Longleaf Coalition and the Sandhills PBA, a “Longleaf Restoration In-Progress” design and sign for landowners to display on their properties undergoing longleaf restoration.

Fort Bragg DPTM – Barry Hull

- No update

Fort Bragg ESB – Jackie Britcher

- Jackie briefly updated that Fort Bragg is making good progress with their 2021 burn program goals and achievements.

Fort Bragg WB – Alan Schultz

- Alan shared that Fort Bragg Wildlife Branch has been working with the NC Bird Atlas project.

NCWRC – Brady Beck, Mike Martin, & Kacy Cook

- Tim Mcfayden updated the partnership on recent land management work on game lands in the Sandhills including:
 - Accomplished ~9,700 acres of prescribed fire so far in 2021.
- Mike Martin gave an update on work related to WRC herpetofauna projects including:
 - Getting pine barrens treefrog surveys up and running. Mike is focused on filling gaps on areas that lack historical data or where data is outdated.
 - Gopher frog are being released at a new WRC site, and overall, the gopher frog head starting project seems to be running smoothly. WRC is continuing to treat fire ants at 17 Frog Pond.
- Kacy Cook provided an updated on the Joint Chiefs Grant for the Greater Uwharrie Conservation Partnership
 - The grant was resubmitted and if approved will provide over \$2 million of funding.
 - The project seeks to reconnect the Sandhills to the Uwharries with steppingstones of habitat on private lands in the corridor.

USFS – Susan Miller

- Susan expressed a special thanks to Chris Coxen, Kacy Cook, Jeff Marcus, and Jesse Wimberly for their work on the Joint Chiefs Grant resubmission
- Various projects including:
 - Potentially paving roads in portion of the forest.

- Improving the Wood Run Trailhead on 24/27 and adding additional trails.
- Approximately 6,000 acres of burning was accomplished in the Uwharrie NF this season.
- Thanks to Three Rivers Land Trust, the USFS has taken over the Walker's Creek tract and USFS has added a new trailhead.

NCNHP – Scott Pohlman

- NHP is busy on catching up on their field work backlog caused by the COVID-19 shut down
- All Land and Water Fund applications are in and currently being reviewed.

Sandhills PBA – Jesse Wimberley

- The PBA just held field event for landowners focused on forest thinning and tools of the trade.
- Many PBA members were funded for burning by EQIP.

Southern Conservation Trust– Jesse Woodsmith

- SCT recently held a landowner outreach event. The event drew over 50 private landowners and received a write up in The Pilot, and the article can be found [here](#).
- Fireline work on the preserve will begin in July 2021.
- Understory/midstory thinning and mulching has been ongoing.

RLUAC – Pete Campbell

- RLUAC will be undergoing a transition period in which Pete will be stepping down as executive director; his role will be filled by someone at Benchmark Planning.

- The next meeting of the NCSCP will take place on **Wednesday September 15, 2021 from 1:00 pm – 4:00 pm**. We are seeking input from Partnership members about the forum for this meeting, which could include an in-person component in addition to virtual via MS Teams ([Click here to join the meeting](#)). Please fill out this poll to share your opinion: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/BHK2ZPD>. The theme of the next meeting will be lessons learned from decades of research on Fort Bragg by NC State University.