

MARCH 2017 WORKING GROUP UPDATES

Communications Working Group

No report received.

Resource Management Working Group

After a long hiatus, the Resource Management Working Group will be organizing a field day this fall to discuss fire and timber management issues throughout the Partnership. Date TBA.

RCW Recovery Working Group

Since the 2016 RCW breeding season, the RCW Recovery Working Group (WG) has focused on management of Safe Harbor properties supporting RCW groups and properties that have potential for future RCW recruitment, as well as management of RCW habitat on public lands.

Sandhills East – Safe Harbor groups that support the Primary Core Recovery Population

Southern Pines-Pinehurst (SOPI) Significant Support Population

The SOPI Significant Support population within Moore County presently consists of 37 RCW potential breeding groups (PBG) that occur within remnant, old growth longleaf pine tracts as well as clusters along golf courses, on horse farms and within forested subdivisions. Weymouth Woods State Nature Preserve (WWSNP) RCW groups are counted separately as they are managed as part of the Primary Core Recovery Sandhills population. RCW have increased in protected areas where prescribed fire can be effectively combined with artificial cavity installment, particularly on the 4,000 acre Walthour Moss Foundation (WMF). In contrast, a steady attrition of groups has been observed in developed areas of SOPI despite intensive management including the installation of \pm 100 artificial cavities in the last decade.

Group loss has occurred most notably in Pinehurst, where there is increasing construction and build-out of residential and commercial areas surrounding golf courses that have long supported RCW groups. Approximately 2/3 of SOPI groups were granted protection under the US Fish & Wildlife Service's (USFWS) RCW Safe Harbor Program during the first push for enrollment from 1995-2000. These original 27 groups were on Pinehurst Golf Courses No. 1 through No. 9, the Country Club of North Carolina, Mid-Pines and Pine Needles and Forest Creek. The 27 baseline groups have now been reduced to 16 groups. Attempts to stabilize these groups and reclaim lost baseline groups continue and the translocation effort to central SOPI began in 2014. Population monitoring and cluster status will determine where to focus future RCW translocations within SOPI. This effort is concurrent with management to increase RCW groups in western Moore County (MOOR) and the WMF (enrolled into a

Safe Harbor agreement by 2003) thereby increasing probability of dispersing RCWs to central SOPI from both west and east.

The USFWS Standard for Managed Stability (SMS) are the guidelines for RCW foraging habitat requirements for groups on privately-owned lands. When the SMS was first put in practice for regulatory purposes, earlier pine removal within RCW foraging partitions was in part balanced by the relative abundance of remaining pines. The current rate of pine deforestation in several managed SOPI partitions is jeopardizing both long term viability of baseline groups and adherence to the SMS.

RCW WG partner members have been increasing their coordination of private landowner interactions with intent to maximize engagement of corporate and private landowners who own and/ or manage both Safe Harbor and non- Safe Harbor properties.

Western Moore County Subpopulation (MOOR)

Following the gradual extirpation of RCW groups within western MOOR during the 1990s, MOOR RCWs have demonstrated growth in the last 15 years in response to management by both landowners and biologists. Data from 2016 documented 6 active clusters occupied by 6 groups on multiple large landholdings enrolled in Safe Harbor.

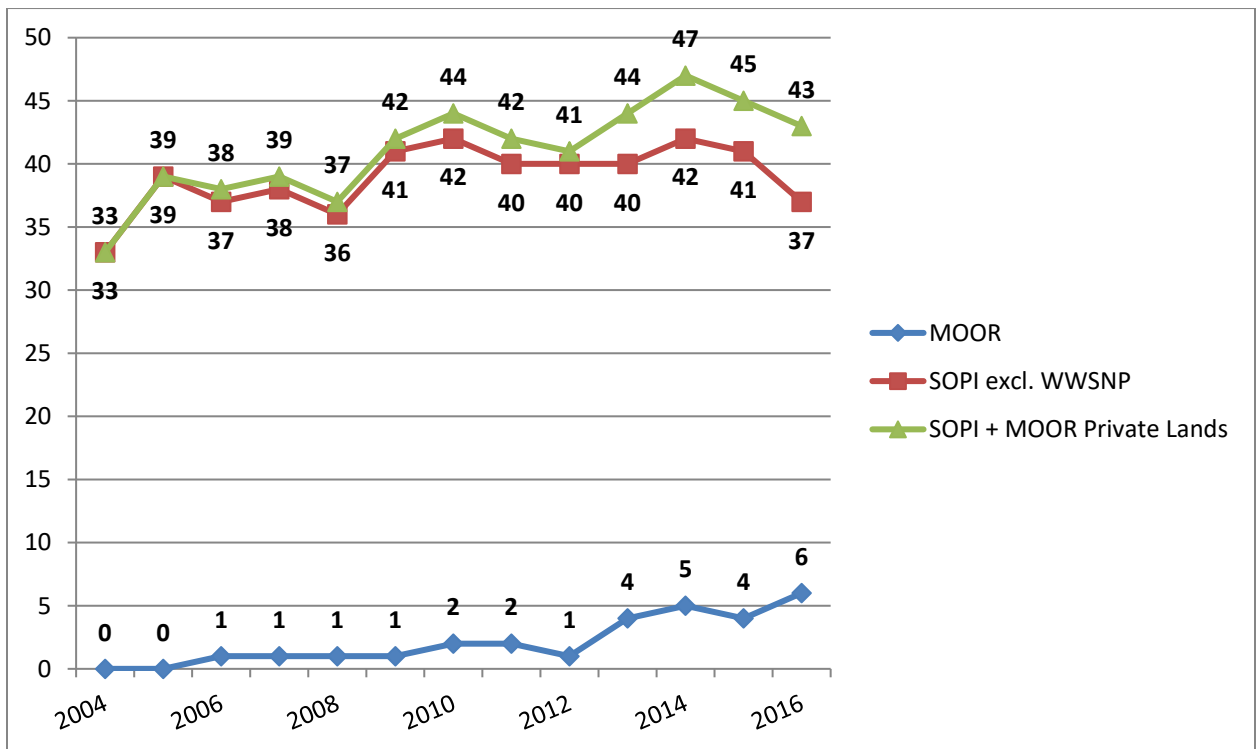


Figure 1. Number of RCW Potential breeding groups within SOPI and MOOR 2004 - 2016

To assist with above stated objective of managing and recruiting RCW to stabilize and increase private land groups, Sandhills Ecological Institute (SEI) supervised the following recent activities:

Recruitment cluster MOOR E07 was established near Moore Meadow within the WMF North Country in October 2016. SEI plans to survey for a suitable recruitment stand within a separate North Country parcel to install an additional cluster by Firestone Lake.

Twelve insert cavities were installed in November 2016 within recruitment clusters to support the translocation of 3 juvenile RCW pairs. Clusters SOPI 53 (Pinehurst No. 7 Fairwoods), MOOR 1 (McKean) and MOOR E04 (Pinewild) were recipient clusters for translocated Fort Bragg juveniles on 7 and 12 December 2016. An additional 12 insert cavities and 6 drilled cavities were provisioned in 9 clusters to refurbish or stabilize Safe Harbor baseline clusters between January and February 2017.

Land Protection Working Group

Since the last NC Sandhills Conservation Partnership meeting (from 12/7/16 – 3/8/17) TNC closed on a 20.54 acre easement with Julian Johnson (Figure 1), adding the corner at the entrance to Fort Bragg on Vass-Raeford Rd to his existing easement.

Partners applied for funding for new projects from the Clean Water Management Trust fund 2017 cycle, including:

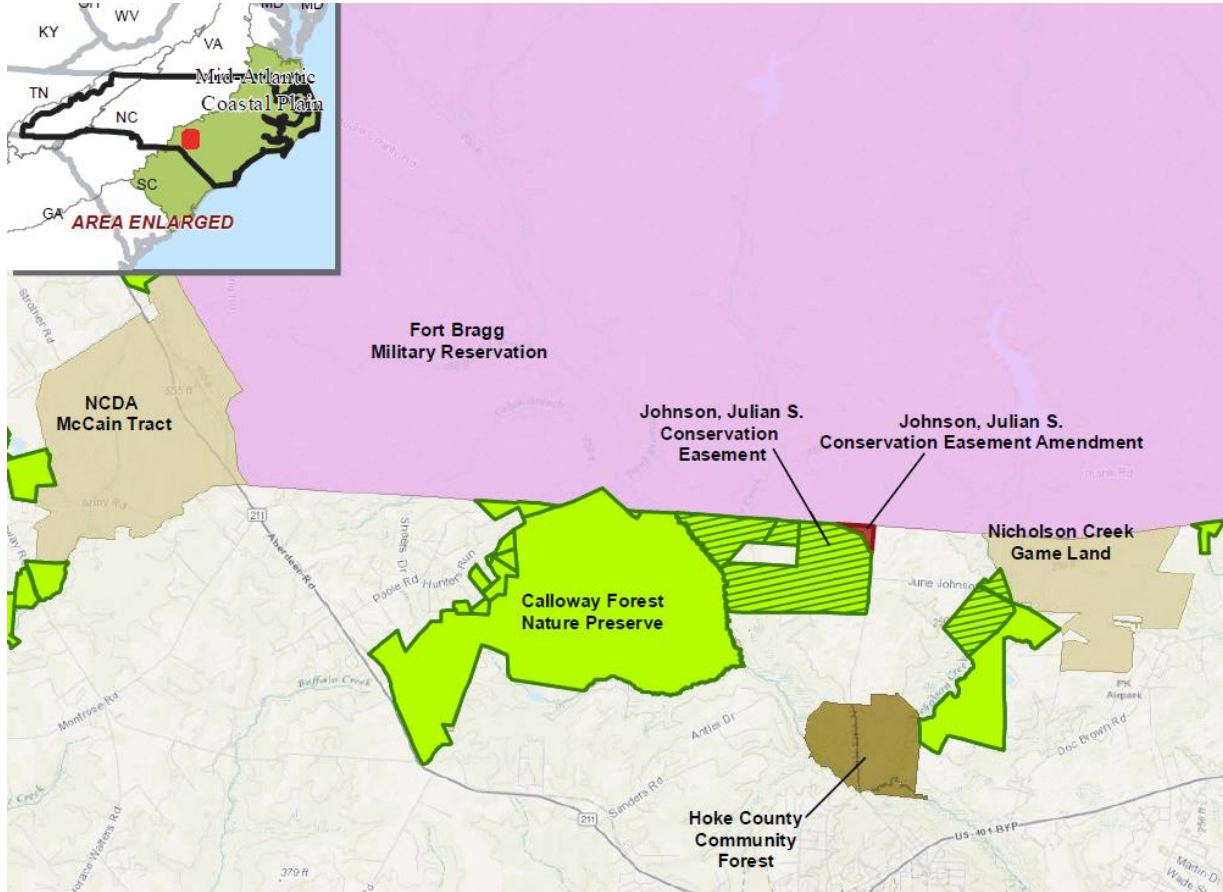
- NCWRC applied for funding to purchase the Womble, Usher, and Godwin II properties from TNC. These properties are adjacent to Sandhills Game Land and will become part of the game land.
- SALT applied for funding for one new project
- TNC applied for funding for a conservation easement on the Baker tract (along the southern Bragg boundary, across the street from Julian Johnson) and conservation easements on Lobelia Lakes, which includes 2 landowners along the Little River on the northern Bragg boundary south of Wood Lake

The NC Department of Agriculture applied for a Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) Challenge grant that includes properties adjacent to Fort Bragg, Camp Lejeune, and Seymour Johnson Air Force Base. This is one tangible outcome from the recently expanded eastern NC Sentinel Landscape. The request included funds for the Lobelia Lakes conservation easements as well as some land that sits off the end of Pope Airfield in Spring Lake. The land along Tank Creek sits in the Accident Potential Zone and any incompatible development could hamper the Army's ability to fly larger planes out of Pope in the future.

The Army has instituted a "pause" in their Army Compatible Use Buffer (ACUB) program to review administrative procedures and strategies for the program. From Dec 2016 – June 2017 ACUB partners (including TNC in NC Sandhills) are asked not to expend any funds. It is unclear if this review

will result in changes to the program and how they might affect the Fort Bragg- TNC Cooperative Agreement.

Figure 1. Julian Johnson conservation easement addition, locator map.



Reserve Design Working Group

There have been a number of projects within the last 3 months. We're close to completing all of the upland longleaf pine surveys for the Sandhills. There are only about 30 left. This work should be complete later this spring.

Work has begun on a model to identify and assess the condition of longleaf stands across the state of North Carolina. The work is progressing faster than expect and the first set of results should be ready for review within a month or two. Completing the full project is expected to take approximately 1 year.

Several analyses examining the quantity and quality of water in the Sandhills have been conducted as required by the NCSCP monitoring plan. The results were presented at the March 8 NCSCP steering committee meeting and summarized in the meeting minutes.

Jeff Marcus has updated the smoke awareness layer for the Conservation Reserve Design Working Group Plan. The update is being considered by members of the working group and will be incorporated into the plan by the end of March.

Finally, a final report detailing the findings from the isolated wetland surveys last winter is nearing completion, hopefully by summer 2017. Several members of the committee are working on the report and there is interest in trying to publish it in a peer-reviewed journal, such as Journal of Herpetology.