

Minutes
North Carolina Sandhills Conservation Partnership
Steering Committee Meeting
1:00PM – 4:00PM Wednesday, December 2nd, 2020
CONFERENCE CALL

➤ Welcome and Introductions

➤ Steering Committee Attendance

Present

Jeff Marcus	TNC
Brady Beck	NCWRC
Pete Benjamin	USFWS
Pete Edmonds - Chair	Ft. Bragg/DPTM
David Heins	Fort Bragg/ED
Brian Yeich	NCFS
Jeff Walters	SEI

Absent

Monica Stephenson	Fort Bragg/DPW
Crystal Cockman	Three Rivers Land Trust
Susan James	USAEC
Sean Gough	NCDPR

Other attendees:

Jackie Britcher, Jessie Schillaci (Fort Bragg ESB), Rex Badgett (NCDOT), Dan Hannon (TNC/USFWS), John Hammond, Caroline Krom, Susan Miller, John Ann Shearer (USFWS), Amanda Walrod (USFS), Jeff Humphries, Jeff Hall, Mike Martin, Gabriela Garrison (NCWRC), Carmella Stirrat (TNC), Rex Badgett (NCDOT), Jesse Wimberley (PBA), Amanda Walrod (USFS), Barry Hull, Rod Fleming, Alan Schultz, Stacy Huskins (Fort Bragg), Jesse Woodsmith, Melvin Ezzell (Pine Forest Management), Andy Van Lanen, Kerry Brust (SEI), Jon Blanchard (NCDPR), Wendy Dunaway (Fayetteville PWC), Nathan Shepard, Scott Pohlman (NCNHP), Ron Myers (NCFS), Elizabeth McCombs (Enviva), Steely Russell (Three Rivers Land Trust), Pete Campbell (RLUAC).

- The benefits of NFWF management for Bachman’s sparrow populations – Jeff & Emma Marcus, The Nature Conservancy
- Jeff and Emma Marcus presented findings from a long-term monitoring project interested in assessing the effectiveness of NFWF funding and management on Bachman’s sparrow populations.

- The recent effort follows up on a statewide assessment of Bachman's sparrow population from 2012-2014.
 - Since 2013, NFWF funding led to a dramatic increase in the number of burns and annual acreage of burning conducted by TNC and NCWRC.
 - In 2019, Jeff and others revisited 219 sites that both received NFWF funding and had previously documented populations of Bachman's sparrow in order to conduct point count surveys.
 - The 2019 surveys and analysis showed an increase in the amount of suitable habitat as well as an increase in the number of birds per point (abundance).
 - Further analysis showed that that Bachman's sparrow avoided areas categorized as fire infrequent sites, while sites categorized as frequent fire sites were used in proportion to their availability
 - Overall, fire and NFWF management are important and results indicate that these management efforts have been beneficial to Bachman's sparrow distribution and abundance.
 - Jeff and others will repeat this effort in 2021 for the Cape Fear Arch and Onslow Bight landscapes.
- Nick's Creek Longleaf Reserve plan – Jesse Woodsmith, Southern Conservation Trust & Melvin Ezell, Pine Forest Management
- Jesse Woodsmith and Melvin Ezell presented ongoing work and future plans for the recently acquired *Nick's Creek Longleaf Reserve*, a ~1,665 acre property located between Pinehurt and West End in Moore County.
 - Several rare plants and animals, including pine barrens tree frog, RCWs, and sandhills lily, have been previously documented on the property, and the approximately 67% of the property contains longleaf pine forest of varying age and condition.
 - The planning process was completed in partnership with the NCSU Coastal Dynamics Lab.
 - Southern Conservation Trust is currently working with David Schnake, research forester with NC Department of Agriculture, to inventory and develop a forest management plan.
 - Current work includes boundary marking and management and new gates.
 - Future plans for Nick's Creek include:
 - Using mechanical and chemical treatments for thinning and controlling midstory and understory.
 - Establishment of fire lines and experimental stands to demonstrate various methods of fire, mechanical, and chemical management.
 - Using a receipt-based approach to management (e.g., paying for management through timber harvest and pine straw raking).
 - Using Nick's Creek as a site to conduct prescribed fire training sessions.
 - Southern Conservation Trust is interested in partnering with researchers, local agencies/organizations, schools and educators, and parks and recreation

stakeholders to maximize the contribution of Nick's Creek Longleaf Reserve to benefiting local and regional interests and needs.

- Longleaf Ecosystem Occurrence (LEO) Database project update – Dan Hannon (TNC/USFWS)
 - Dan Hannon presented preliminary results and findings from the 3 months of work on the North Carolina portion of the LEO project.
 - The project began in the NC Sandhills at the end of August 2020 and aimed to visit and conduct rapid assessments at 500 private/previously undocumented (e.g., forest inventory) stands of longleaf pine forest.
 - As of this meeting, the effort has successfully documented and assessed 498 stands/patches where longleaf pine forest was present.
 - The priority areas for surveys included:
 - Gaps and corridors between large blocks of longleaf.
 - Buffers around large blocks of longleaf.
 - Managed or protected areas that had not been previously inventoried.
 - The next steps for the project are:
 - Continuing surveys in Sandhills with TNC staff and volunteers
 - Repeating this effort in Cape Fear Arch and Onslow Bight.
 - Summarizing data and classifying condition based on attributes collected during assessments.

- Three Rivers Land Trust Sportsman Access Program – Steely Russell, Three Rivers Land Trust
 - Steely Russell presented about Three Rivers Land Trust's Sportsman Access Program.
 - A lottery system will be used, and successful applicants will gain permission to hunt on a private 200-acre block of Three Rivers Land Trust land for a full week.
 - Annual membership is required, and the draw rate and fees are as follows:
 - \$100 – 4 draws in lottery
 - \$300 – 7 draws in lottery
 - \$500 – 9 draws in lottery
 - Thus far, the lottery system has a 100% success rate
 - All proceeds go back into land protection and conservation in Sandhills and Piedmont.

- Party for the Pine 2021 and 20th Anniversary of NCSCP – open discussion
 - A discussion about the relationship between the 20th anniversary of the partnership and the 2021 Party for the Pine.
 - Nancy Williamson and John Blanchard updated the group saying that NC Parks doesn't plan on holding anything large-scale for the 2021 Party for the Pine. Other ideas for the festival include:
 - Setting up a self-guided hike to the old tree and the former champion tree, similar to the info we would give with our guided hikes.
 - Trying to tie in some kind of virtual experience to the hike as well, but they don't have any intentions of going to a full-scale virtual festival.

- Jeff Marcus suggested decoupling the 20th Anniversary celebration from the 2021 Party for the Pine. Other ways to mark the occasion of the 20th Anniversary include a news articles or press release.
- Nominations and vote for a new LIT coordinator – Susan Miller, USFWS
 - As Susan Miller prepare to depart for a new position with the US Forest Servest in Uwharrie National Forest, she will be relinquishing her role as the Sandhills LIT coordinator.
 - Some discussion points included:
 - What the future looks like for a USFWS presence in the Southern Pines and the Sandhills at-large now that Susan is leaving.
 - What the future of the NCSCP dedicated ORISE fellowship looks like. Pete Benjamin ensured the group that he’s committed to continued support for USFWS interests and ORISE support in the Sandhills.
 - Susan Miller nominated Jeff Marcus for the role of LIT coordinator, and that nomination was seconded by David Heins.
 - Following a vote, Jeff Marcus was unanimously elected to become the next LIT coordinator.
- Recognizing Susan Miller’s contribution to the Partnership, RCW recovery, and the conservation community of the Sandhills over the last 21 years.
 - With Susan Miller soon to depart for her new role as the District Ranger in the Uwharrie National Forest, the partnership recognized Susan’s 2+ decades of dedication to the Partnership, Red-cockaded woodpecker recovery in the Sandhills, and strong support and contributions to the Safe Harbor Program.
 - Pete Campbell reminded the group that when he hired Susan in 1999, after significant previous experience working on RCWs for Fort Bragg, she strongly took the reigns of the Safe Harbor program.
 - On the board of directors for RLUAC, Susan helped guide land use planning to achieve the best outcome for the Partnership’s interest and the Department of Defense.
 - A RLUAC award for distinguished service was commemorated in a plaque presented to Susan, and a framed photo from the gallery of Brady Beck was also gifted.
- Sandhills Prescribed Burn Association’s next NFWF application – Jesse Wimberley, Sandhills PBA
 - Jesse Wimberly updated the Partnership about the next NFWF grant that will be submitted by the Sandhills PBA.
 - The deadline for submission is February 2021, and there will be 2 grants submitted for NFWF funds for the NCSCP – one for funding private land management (administered by the PBA), and another for public lands.
 - This is the 4th grant cycle, and we’re in year 6 of NFWF funding.
 - The private lands funds will go towards:
 - Landowner training
 - Educating the general public to reduce pushback about private land prescribed fire by neighbors.
 - Money for educational tools and promotional efforts

- Hoke County Community Forest will serve as a site for training, educating, and demonstrating prescribed for to the local community.

➤ Working Group Reports and Discussion

- **Resource Management** (Brady Beck)
 - No update
- **RCW Recovery** (Kerry Brust)
 - SEI and others are wrapping up 2020 monitoring and breeding group census.
 - During the winter of 2020-2021 work will include maintaining cavities and adding recruitment clusters at the following sites:
 - South of Weymouth Woods
 - Sweeny Property
 - Pine Bluff Park
 - Nick's Creek Longleaf Reserve
 - Auman Safe Harbor Property
 - Carolina Horse Park
 - Rick Studenmond property
 - For an update on the number of potential breeding groups in the Sandhills, Kerry provided the following:
 - In the Sandhills – East, there were a total of 494 breeding groups, with Fort Bragg responsible for the majority of these groups. Fort Bragg increased the number of breeding groups from 458 in 2019 to 461 in 2020. Off of Fort Bragg, numbers in the Sandhills-east remained mostly stable, with 1 additional group being added on private land.
 - In the Sandhills – West, there were a total of 214 breeding groups, and in this area, Camp Mackall saw an increase from 16 in 2019 to 19 in 2020.
- **Communications** (Debbie Crane)
 - No update
- **Land Protection** (Jeff Marcus)
 - The land protection working group had no major updates to share since the September 2020 meeting of the Partnership.
- **Reserve Design** (Dan Hannon)
 - No update