

Minutes
North Carolina Sandhills Conservation Partnership
Steering Committee Meeting
1:00PM – 4:00PM Tuesday, September 16th, 2020
CONFERENCE CALL

- Welcome and Introductions
- Steering Committee Attendance

Present

Jeff Marcus	TNC
Brady Beck	NCWRC
Clyde Sorensen	SEI
Crystal Cockman	Three Rivers Land Trust
Pete Benjamin	USFWS
Pete Edmonds - Chair	Ft. Bragg/DPTM

Absent

Monica Stephenson	Fort Bragg/DPW
Susan James	USAEC
Brian Yeich	NCFS
Sean Gough	NCDPR
David Heins	Fort Bragg/ED

Other attendees:

Jackie Britcher, Jessie Schillaci (Fort Bragg ESB), Rex Badgett (NCDOT), Dan Hannon (ORISE Fellow), Sarah Crate, Ryan Bollinger (Longleaf Alliance), John Hammond, Caroline Krom, Susan Miller (USFWS), Mike Martin, Gabriela Garrison (NCWRC), Rhonda Sturgill, Debbie Crane (TNC), Rex Badgett (NCDOT), Jesse Wimberley (PBA), Terry Savery, Amanda Walrod (USFS), Barry Hull, Kevin Crawford, Rod Fleming, Alan Schultz, Stacy Huskins (Fort Bragg), Jesse Woodsmith (Southern Conservation Trust), Jay Carter, Anna Prinz, Jeff Walters, Kerry Brust (SEI), Jon Blanchard, Robyn Glenney (NCDPR), Judith Ratcliffe, Scott Pohlman (NCNHP), Ron Myers (NCFS), Elizabeth McCombs (Enviva), Chris Coxen.

- Red-cockaded woodpecker downlisting – Pete Benjamin, USFWS
 - The USFWS will be announcing the proposed downlisting of the red-cockaded woodpecker to federally threatened in upcoming weeks.
 - This is not a decision, but an announcement of the process of downlisting to begin.
 - Following the announcement, the proposal will be posted to the federal register and a period of public comments will follow.
 - Partner input is encouraged on the proposed 4D rule change.

- Predictors of upland hardwood distribution and the relationship between upland hardwood distribution and avian occupancy at Fort Bragg – Dan Hannon, The Nature Conservancy
 - Dan Hannon presented his master’s research from the 2018 field season at Fort Bragg.
 - His study was focused on the environmental and management factors that influence upland hardwood abundance in 2 groups of hardwoods: fire-tolerant oaks and fire-sensitive hardwoods; he also researched how upland hardwood cover and other habitat metrics influenced occupancy of avian species found in the longleaf pine uplands.
 - Dan found that the fire-tolerant oaks were most abundant on steep xeric slopes, areas near firebreaks, with low pine basal area – regardless of fire history, whereas, the fire-sensitive hardwoods were abundant at lower elevations, with loamier soils, fewer growing-season fires, and low pine basal area.
 - Hardwood control efforts between the 2 groups of hardwoods may prove more difficult in areas that satisfy these predictors of abundance, or if promoting small amounts of hardwoods in the uplands, these areas may be where hardwood inclusions would be the most successful.
 - Regarding the avian community, occupancy for 6 species of birds was positively influenced by low-moderate levels of hardwood cover, but 4 species (3 of which are high priorities for managers) were negatively influenced by dense hardwood stems. High levels of pine cover/basal area also negatively influenced management priority birds.
 - If managers could achieve hardwood cover levels between 5-15% while keeping hardwood stem densities below 250 stems/ha it would limit negative impacts to management priority birds while also improving avian diversity in uplands. Reducing pine basal area and canopy cover would be beneficial for management priority birds as well.
- Greater Uwharrie Conservation Partnership Joint Chiefs Grant – Chris Coxen
 - The Joint Chiefs grant will follow a public-private model for conservation funding on the landscape.
 - The program seeks to use Farm Bill programs through NRCS to promote private lands management – especially for prescribed burning for habitat management.
 - The proposal includes funding for a new NRCS staff to handle the expected increase in demand for Farm Bill-funded cost-share management projects.
 - A 5 person shared burn crew will also be funded by NFWF and created for conducting prescribed fire on public and private land in the GUCP region.
 - Chris expects to work with the Sandhills PBA and host events to promote the goals of the Joint Chiefs Grant.
 - The proposal is expected to be submitted to USFS by early-October
- Longleaf Ecosystem Occurrence (LEO) Survey Update – Dan Hannon, The Nature Conservancy

- The LEO project in the Sandhills is up and running as of 26 August 2020.
 - The goal is to visit at least 400 polygons of possible longleaf pine forest and assess the current conditions.
 - As of this meeting, Dan, TNC Staff, and a group of volunteers have visited over 100 polygons, and Dan expects the goal of 400 to be reached by early November.
 - The LEO project will move on to the Cape Fear Arch and the Onslow Bight once the Sandhills regions is completed.
- Update on Fort Bragg's MPF project – Barry Hull, Fort Bragg ITAM
- Fort Bragg will be hosting 2 vendors who will compete for a contract to manufacture the next generation of battlefield tanks.
 - For the installation, this means that Ft. Bragg will be adding tank maneuvering space, but this will mostly be taking place on existing drop zones.
 - All additional tank travel will still be conducted on roads and designated tank transport areas.
 - The NEPA review process has not yet been started to assess the environmental impact of this initiative.
- Working Group Reports and Discussion
- **Resource Management** (Brady Beck)
 - No update
 - **RCW Recovery** (Kerry Brust)
 - SEI and others (Jay Carter, Kevin O'Day, Brady Beck and Fort Bragg) were in the field conducting the intensive monitoring of Sandhills RCW populations.
 - Fledgling success was down this year, and a NCSU PhD student under the advisement of Caren Cooper may be looking into a research project to understand this trend.
 - The prevalence of Avian Keratin Disorder in the Sandhills RCW population is being assessed. Sixty individuals have demonstrated symptoms of AKD in the SEI Sandhills study area, but the samples sent to the USGS in Alaska for Poecivirus testing showed no evidence of the virus.
 - **Communications** (Debbie Crane)
 - The communications working group will send out talking points in preparation for the USFWS announcement of the RCW down-listing proposal to assist members with inquiries from the media and public.
 - The 20th anniversary celebration of the Partnership is being planned for spring 2021. The event may be virtual, in-person, or a combination of both depending on the status of COVID-19.
 - **Land Protection**

- A conservation Easement on the Rogers Tract, a 200-acre property in Montgomery County, is currently pending. This easement is in a critical corridor area for the Uwharrie – Sandhills landscape.
- The Nature Conservancy has applications in with the Land and Water Fund (formerly Clean Water Management Trust Fund) for deals on The Butler Tract, Blue Farm, and Lafayette.

- **Reserve Design** (Dan Hannon)
 - No update

➤ Partner Updates

SEI – Kerry Brust

- SEI is working to expand private land RCW clusters. They have funding through NFWF for artificial cavity installation on some Safe Harbor properties.
- Their hope is to boost recruitment.

DOT – Rex Badgett

- No update

NC Parks – John Blanchard

- Carvers Creek accomplished 18 fire during the 2020 burn season.
- Weymouth Woods accomplished 11 fires over 220 acres during the 2020 burn season and TSI work has been conducted as well.
- RCW cavity inserts have been installed at Weymouth Woods and cavities at Carvers Creek are occupied.

TNC – Jeff Marcus

- NFWF grant for burning, herbicide, RCW cavities, and firebreaks at Tunstall Bay
- TNC is now hiring for their seasonal burn crews.
- TNC has a new fire manager for the Coastal Plain
- The results of Jeff’s recent survey effort for the effect of NFWF management on Bachman’s sparrow distribution are in progress.

USFWS – Susan Miller

- RCW downlisting.

Fort Bragg DPTM – Barry Hull

- The marines show up in October for their annual training at Ft. Bragg.

Fort Bragg ESB – Jackie Britcher

- No update

NCWRC – Mike Martin

- WRC is working with DOT to have herp/wildlife crossings installed along NC 211, near Ashmont Rd in McCain.
- Gopher frogs headstarts have been released at Sandhill Game Land Block T, and WRC is now monitoring these headstarts.

The Longleaf Alliance

- The biennial conference of The Longleaf Alliance will be held virtually in October.

USFS

- No update

NCNHP – Judy Ratcliffe

- NHP is currently planning their annual HerpMapper data pull for recent records of rare reptiles and amphibians added to this citizen science app.
- The October data distribution will take place in a few weeks, so watch for new datasets of EOs, Managed Areas, and Natural Areas.

Sandhills PBA – Jesse Wimberley

- No update