



Pine Tree Farming and Endangered Woodpeckers

A Safe Harbor for Both in South Carolina



Photo courtesy of the Burris family

Dr. and Mrs. Skeet Burris on the edge of a natural pond.

“It’s a win-win situation,” said Dr. A. G. “Skeet” Burris about the Fish and Wildlife Service’s Safe Harbor Agreement for red-cockaded woodpeckers (RCW) in South Carolina. A tree-farmer and Beaufort orthodontist, Dr. Burris has enrolled more than 1400 acres of pine woodlands in the statewide agreement for the endangered woodpecker.

“It’s a win for landowners who grow long-rotation forests that produce

high-value timber,” he said. “It’s also a win from other perspectives: the management practices for RCW’s are excellent for other wildlife and meet our goals for forest aesthetics. The same practices help maintain water quality and provide a range of recreational opportunities. Those are the four goals of the American Tree Farm System—wood, wildlife, water, and recreation.”

Long-rotation management benefits endangered red-cockaded woodpeckers, especially if it applies to mature longleaf pine forests, ecosystems that have been reduced by 90 percent because of conversion to agriculture, loblolly pine plantations, housing, and highways. Through Safe Harbor Agreements, landowners are helping to restore the piney woods, manage timber land for profit, and help the endangered species.

Background

In the past, Burris noted, landowners who wanted to practice long-rotation forest management were deterred from doing

so because of concern that mature trees would encourage woodpeckers to move in, creating liability under the Endangered Species Act. Landowners feared harvest restrictions, fines, and even imprisonment. It takes the woodpeckers years to excavate nest cavities in the older, living trees. In a pre-emptive approach, landowners cut the trees before they reached maturity.

A New Approach to Conservation

About a decade ago the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources developed a programmatic Safe Harbor Agreement for the RCW, encouraging conservation on non-Federal lands through technical assistance, funding, and regulatory assurances. Still growing, the State’s program has 120 landowners and 110,000 acres. Created by the Service in 1995, Safe Harbor Agreements protect participating landowners from vulnerability to the “take” prohibitions of the Endangered Species Act in connection with their otherwise lawful activities.



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—Dr. Skeet Burris

Female Red-cockaded woodpecker.



Randy Browning/MFWF/USFWS

Hand-planting containerized longleaf seedlings.

For the duration of the agreements the woodpeckers have a safe harbor—and so do the landowners. At the end of the agreements, landowners may return the property to its initial condition through an enhancement of survival permit, allowing the removal of the improved habitat or additional birds, and landowners are required to notify the Service of “new” woodpeckers so that the agency can add them to colonies or establish colonies elsewhere.

“It’s a 180-degree change in approach,” Burris said. “We’ve gone from penalties to incentives. Everybody is on board. We don’t want to destroy what we’re trying to save.”

Under the agreements, for a specific time period landowners provide a net conservation benefit—typically by maintaining, expanding, or creating habitat in the historic range of a species or facilitating its reintroduction there. Burris is providing a net conservation benefit for red-cockaded woodpeckers by planting longleaf, practicing long timber-harvest rotations, and conducting annual prescribed burns. He is also acquiring property, restoring it, and enrolling it in the Safe Harbor Agreement to increase habitat connectivity.

Burris Family’s Vision and Accomplishments

In 1986, Skeet Burris and his wife, Gail, bought 95 acres of clearcut and former cropland in Hampton County, where the trees were about 12 years old. They named the property Cypress Bay Plantation. The entire Burris family, including five sons—Hank, Andy, Ben, Tony, and Charlie—signed a vision statement for the land, emphasizing conservation and sustainable forestry.

Then the Burrises began buying other properties. Now they own more than



Randy Browning/MFWF/USFWS

Bobwhite quail.

2900 acres and lease another 700. They spot-thin 40- to 50-year-old loblolly and slash pine trees, and they plant longleaf in their place. They burn these stands regularly, maintaining open, park-like habitat for red-cockaded woodpeckers, fox squirrels, bobwhite quail, wild turkeys, and other wildlife.

Benefits of the American Tree Farm System and Safe Harbor Program

“In joining the Tree Farm System, the first step is to develop a management plan for the property,” Burris said, adding that “This is important as generations change—to project income for the future.” He terms the American Forest Foundation’s Tree Farm System “the premiere organization” putting family-forest landowners in the decision-making business by uniting landowners, loggers, and the forest industry. A certified tree farmer since 1991, Burris was named the South Carolina Tree Farmer of the Year in 1995, Regional Tree Farmer of the Year in 1996, and National Tree Farmer of the Year in 2000.

How does the Safe Harbor Agreement help landowners?

In South Carolina, the Department Natural Resources has provided cost-share grants for activities such as burning and maintaining fire breaks. The Service’s Partners Program has also supplied funding to improve and maintain habitat. The grants are available to family forest landowners and, as Burris said, “The benefits go exactly where they are intended—on the ground.”

Evolving Land Management

Burris noted that the South Carolina’s Low Country has changed from mainly agricultural land to predominantly commercial timberland. Now the State has 12.9 million acres of forest land, 40 percent in pine, he said, adding that, in 2006 and



Photo courtesy of the Burris family

Skeet Burris and young Charlie conduct a prescribed burn.

2007, timber-producers were number one in jobs and payrolls. “People are in favor of timberland—it is a big employer. Not only that, people like having forests near them.”

Advocating tree-growing for wood, water, wildlife, and recreation—and acknowledging development pressures—Burris is popular on the lecture-circuit. He opens his talks with two questions: “How important is it to you to maintain open space and how important is it to control urban sprawl?” To meet these goals he has a simple answer: “Keep family-forest landowners in the business of growing trees.”

The Burris family is getting together in November for its third annual meeting to develop a new forest management plan and update the estate plan. “What will we burn? What timber will we harvest? What are the children’s expectations and their plans for involvement?”

Mrs. Burris added that the children are interested “probably because early on they were a part of our labor force. That gave them ownership, something we didn’t realize at the time. We’ll be asking them, ‘What do you think about this?’ Also, children may not assume the parents’ vision if it’s not spelled out. There’s a lot of love in this place. Not only did it give our family memories and traditions, but if you can produce a better environment and a beautiful place to educate people, it’s ‘win-win.’”

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