



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE, GEORGIA-PACIFIC LAUNCH LANDMARK ENDANGERED SPECIES AGREEMENT

Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt today announced a first-of-its-kind agreement which balances sound timber management and strong conservation measures to protect an endangered species.

The agreement with Georgia-Pacific Corp. outlines measures to help assure protection of the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker. At the same time, the accord allows for reasonable harvests of the southeastern pine forests which comprise the bird's habitat.

Under the agreement, Georgia-Pacific will conserve the woodpecker's habitat on approximately 4 million acres of the company's forest land in the southeastern United States while conducting forest management activities, including timber harvesting, to avoid damaging the species. The company will also actively implement conservation measures wherever woodpecker populations are found on company lands.

"In the past, our government has rarely provided guidance to corporations about what they need to do to comply with the Endangered Species Act," said Secretary Babbitt. "They've forced corporations to guess, with the only enforcement tool being the threat of a lawsuit. But with some government leadership, we can move forward to protect species and avoid costly and unpredictable lawsuits. That's the course set by this agreement."

"Georgia-Pacific has committed to very strict protection measures in this accord," Secretary Babbitt said. "But in return, they gain a predictability that is helpful to their business. All of us, in turn, gain greater habitat conservation for the red-cockaded woodpecker."

This agreement to preserve the red-cockaded woodpecker builds upon Secretary Babbitt's efforts to encourage ecosystem planning and conservation techniques in southern California to protect the gnatcatcher.

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"This is another example of how we intend to make the Endangered Species Act work for people and the environment," Secretary Babbitt said. "This accord reflects good resource economics and sound conservation techniques."

The Endangered Species Act prohibits "take" of endangered species, which includes killing, harming, or harassing listed species and, in some cases, destroying their habitat. Under its agreement with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, Georgia-Pacific has committed to forest practices which will "avoid take" of the species.

"For years, private landowners have asked for direction on how to 'avoid take,' and our government has failed to respond," said Secretary Babbitt. "This agreement provides a breakthrough in establishing cooperative public and private efforts to save an endangered species."

In addition to protecting the more than 100 red-cockaded woodpecker groups (family units) found on its land in Arkansas, Louisiana, South Carolina, and Mississippi, Georgia-Pacific is enhancing woodpecker habitat. Company personnel will locate and mark all active clusters (cavity trees used by groups), maintain and protect buffer zones, prohibit road construction in sensitive areas, and provide adequate foraging habitat for the bird. Georgia-Pacific lands support roughly 20 percent of the known red-cockaded woodpecker groups found on private land.

"Georgia-Pacific is the first major landowner to develop a proactive plan to conserve the red-cockaded woodpecker," said Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Ralph Costa, the recovery coordinator for the red-cockaded woodpecker. "The company's willingness to commit to this program will help speed up recovery of the species."

Georgia-Pacific's president and chief operating officer, A.D. "Pete" Correll, said, "We always are focused on how our forest management activities affect the land and wildlife on it. This agreement confirms that through innovation and leadership, we are balancing the need to provide wood and paper products to consumers with responsible wildlife conservation practices."

The red-cockaded woodpecker ranges from Texas east to Virginia and nests and roosts exclusively in cavities in older, living pine trees. The species declined as its habitat was altered for a variety of uses. The species was listed in 1970 as endangered. The current population is estimated at 10,000 to 14,000 birds in nearly 4,000 groups within 12 southeastern states.