Law is costing landowners

By COLETTE BAXLEY

COLUMBIA — Being new to Mother Nature, Costaico Inc. now more than 42 million dollars to create good quail habitat on its Pender County, N.C. property, he burned and cleared 20,000 acres. The quail loved it, but not so did the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker.

Now, 1,600 acres of prime 60- to 70-year-old forest is home to the 15-inch black-and-white bird with a white stripe on its cheek. The Endangered Species Act won't allow Costaico to cut the timber or do anything to damage the bird's habitat.

"For doing what environmentalists want, I get a disgusting economic hit," he said.

Wildlife officials also are frustrated with the law. It prohibits existing woodpeckers from harm, but can encourage landowners to stop the bird population from expanding.

Once, for instance, plans to cut timberland not yet inhabited by the woodpecker, "I can't afford to let them take over the whole place," he says.

The bird's population is declining, and a study which indicates the law is not working, said Terry Moore, manager of Georgia's nonnative endangered wildlife program.

The woodpecker was put on the endangered list in 1973. But in the past decade, population in private-owned land has declined more than 45 percent.

It's unclear if the trees are going elsewhere. Woodpecker groups are seeing another trend — about 100 acres per group in survival. They don't know what's happened if left with a silent forest, they eventually die.

In South Carolina, wildlife officials estimate there are 500 of the endangered birds, with 400 on private land and the rest on state or federal-owned property. That's the exact distribution of the birds in private land in the Southeast.

Darryl Jones (photograph) inspects one of the artificial cavities he and co-workers build in trees at the Sandhills State Forest to encourage red-cockaded woodpeckers (photo at right) to nest there.

Woodpecker clouds state forest's future

By COLETTE BAXLEY

CHESTERFIELD — The 11 colonies of red-cockaded woodpeckers nesting in isolated trees are at home in Sandhills State Forest. Taxpayers, however, could end up paying the price.

Sandhills District Forest Manager faces the same problem as some private landowners — how to get needed money from the timber while encouraging the endangered woodpecker population, which also needs the trees to grow. "There has to be a balance somewhere of what we can provide environmentally and still provide income," Murphy said. "The woodpecker affects everything we do here."

It costs about $72,000 a year to operate Sandhills, a state forest.

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birds watch

Forest

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Biologists to move endangered birds

SAVANNAH — Trying to stem the inevitable decline of the Endangered Species Act, state biologists will round up, relocate red-cockaded woodpeckers instead of forcing landowners to tolerate their tiny nests.

Many small landowners are worried they will be prevented from harvesting their timber or developing their land if the endangered woodpeckers are found on it.

The state plan, announced last week, is an attempt to alleviate those fears.

Birds taken off private land will be used to start new colonies on state and federal lands where they have a better chance to survive, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt said in announcing the plan.

"This plan responds to the needs of both the birds and the landowners," he said.

A landowner can sign up for the plan immediately or wait until he finds the birds on his property, said Dottie Head, administrative coordinator with the Georgia Wildlife Resources Division.

To qualify for the program, the birds must make up an isolated population, cut off from others of their kind, said Wildlife Resources endangered species biologist Jim Oser.

These technicians would capture juvenile birds over the next two years and move them. When they are settled in their new homes, the last adults would be captured and moved there, too, Oser said.

If there is a reason to rush, the entire colony could be captured and moved immediately.

"Translocation is allowed under a 1982 amendment to the Endangered Species Act, but it seldom has been," Oser said.

"Conditions seemed right to use it here," Oser said. "Habitat on private lands is disappearing fast. Birds are disappearing daily. For landowners who have them, it can be expensive. The fear factor is out there."

Possible locations for new red-cockaded woodpecker colonies are on Fort Gordon and Fort Stewart.

The red-cockaded woodpecker is the only member of the woodpecker family to dig nest holes in living trees. It prefers old pines infected with red heart disease, which softens the wood.