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16,400.

Status: Extension of a currently approved collection.

Authority: Section 3507 of the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, 44 U.S.C. 35, as amended.

Dated: April 25, 2003.

Wayne Eddins,

*Departmental Reports Management Officer,
Office of the Chief Information Officer.*

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DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Fish and Wildlife Service

Receipt of an Application for an Incidental Take Permit for Silvicultural Activities, Williamsburg County, SC

AGENCY: Fish and Wildlife Service, Interior.

ACTION: Notice.

SUMMARY: Mr. Ben McCutcheon (Applicant) has applied for an incidental take permit (ITP) from the Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) pursuant to Section 10(a)(1)(B) of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (16 U.S.C. 1531 *et seq.*), as amended. The permit would allow take of one group of red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*), a federally listed, endangered species, incidental to silvicultural activities on the Applicant's property in Williamsburg County, South Carolina. The Service, on behalf of the Applicant, has developed a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP), which describes the mitigation measures proposed to address the effects of the Project to the protected species. We have determined that the Applicant's proposal, including the proposed mitigation measures, will individually and cumulatively have a minor or negligible effect on the species covered in the HCP. Therefore, the proposed project is considered a "low-effect" project and would qualify as a categorical exclusion under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The Service announces the availability of the HCP for the ITP application. Copies of the HCP are available, and your comments are solicited.

DATES: Written comments on the permit application, Determination of Low Effect, and HCP should be sent to the Service's Regional Office (see **ADDRESSES**) and should be received on or before June 2, 2003.

ADDRESSES: Persons wishing to review the application, HCP, and supporting documentation may obtain a copy by

writing the Service's Southeast Regional Office, Atlanta, Georgia, at the address below. Documents will also be available for public inspection by appointment during normal business hours at the Regional Office, 1875 Century Boulevard, Suite 200, Atlanta, Georgia 30345 (Attn: Endangered Species Permits), or Charleston Field Office, 176 Croghan Spur Road, Suite 200, Charleston, South Carolina 29407 (Attn: Phil DeGarmo). Written data or comments concerning the application, HCP, or supporting documents should be submitted to the Regional Office. Requests for the documentation should be in writing. Please reference permit number TE063814-0 in such comments, or in requests of the documents discussed herein.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Mr. Aaron Valenta, Regional Permit Coordinator (see **ADDRESSES** above), telephone: 404/679-4144; or Mr. Phil DeGarmo, Fish and Wildlife Biologist, Charleston Field Office (see **ADDRESSES** above), telephone 843/727-4707, extension 21.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The red-cockaded woodpecker is a territorial, non-migratory bird species once common in the southern Coastal Plain from east Texas to Florida and north to Maryland, Missouri, and Kentucky. Red-cockaded woodpeckers roost and nest in cavities excavated in large living pine trees 60 years old or older. The red-cockaded woodpecker is a cooperative breeder that lives in family groups of one to nine birds, with each bird nesting in a separate cavity; the aggregate of cavity trees used by a group is called a cluster. Red-cockaded woodpeckers prefer mature longleaf pine forests, but also inhabit loblolly, pond, slash, shortleaf, and Virginia pine stands. Without periodic fire to control hardwoods, red-cockaded woodpeckers abandon clusters as other cavity competitors and predators typical of hardwood habitats move in. The decline of the red-cockaded woodpecker is due primarily to loss of the old-growth, fire-maintained southern pine ecosystem as a result of logging, fire suppression, and conversion to non-forest land uses.

Recovery activities for the red-cockaded woodpecker are focused on Federal lands. Private lands are also important in our recovery strategy to supplement habitat where the Federal land base is insufficient to support recovery, to establish and maintain connectivity with populations on public lands, and to provide a donor source of juvenile red-cockaded woodpeckers for translocation into designated recovery populations. Red-cockaded

woodpeckers have generally declined on private lands because of habitat fragmentation, and a lack of active habitat management. We believe that red-cockaded woodpeckers geographically isolated on private lands, as on this site, will eventually cease to exist without management for the species.

The applicant intends to harvest 5 acres of merchantable timber and reforest the project site in loblolly pine, resulting in the take of one group of red-cockaded woodpeckers through harm resulting from habitat alteration. The affected group of red-cockaded woodpeckers is not part of a larger population, with the nearest known group found approximately one-half mile away. Isolated populations of red-cockaded woodpeckers in fragmented habitat limit any contribution to the species' recovery by these individuals. The biological goal of the applicant's HCP is to create a new breeding group of red-cockaded woodpeckers in an area of suitable habitat that will consolidate a stable red-cockaded woodpecker population within the species' historic range. This will be accomplished by establishing two recruitment clusters consisting of at least four artificial cavities at two discrete sites on South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) property. Mitigation will be considered successful when one recruitment cluster is occupied by a potential breeding pair (via natural dispersal of resident birds, including subadults) for at least 6 months, including a breeding season. The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation will provide \$10,000 to the Fish and Wildlife Service, who will then contract with a private consultant to complete the required mitigation activities. These activities will consist of conducting the mitigation, minimization, and monitoring required to fulfill all aspects of this HCP. The Clemson Field Office of the Fish and Wildlife Service will fund and supervise the capture and relocation of the existing members of the red-cockaded woodpecker group to a donor site on managed lands.

We believe augmenting or creating a new group of red-cockaded woodpeckers in an area of better habitat would help to consolidate a more stable population. This proposal would offset project impacts while allowing the applicant profitable use of his property. Under Section 9 of the Endangered Species Act (Act), as amended, and its implementing regulations, "taking" of endangered and threatened wildlife is prohibited. However, under limited circumstances, we may issue permits to take such wildlife if the taking is