Red-cockaded Woodpecker Proposed Downlisting

Public Informational Meeting and Public Hearing

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
South Atlantic-Gulf and
Mississippi Basin Regions
December 1, 2020

Participating USFWS employees

This public meeting will offer information about the red-cockaded woodpecker, the Service's proposal to downlist the species as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, and explain how the public can comment on this proposal. After the presentation, the public will have an opportunity to ask questions.

Red-cockaded Woodpecker Proposed Downlisting and 4(d) Rule

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
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Previous Federal Actions

- 1970 – Listed as endangered
- 1973 – Passage of the Endangered Species Act
- 2003 – Recovery Plan (2nd revision)
- 2006 – 5-year review
- 2019 – SSA report

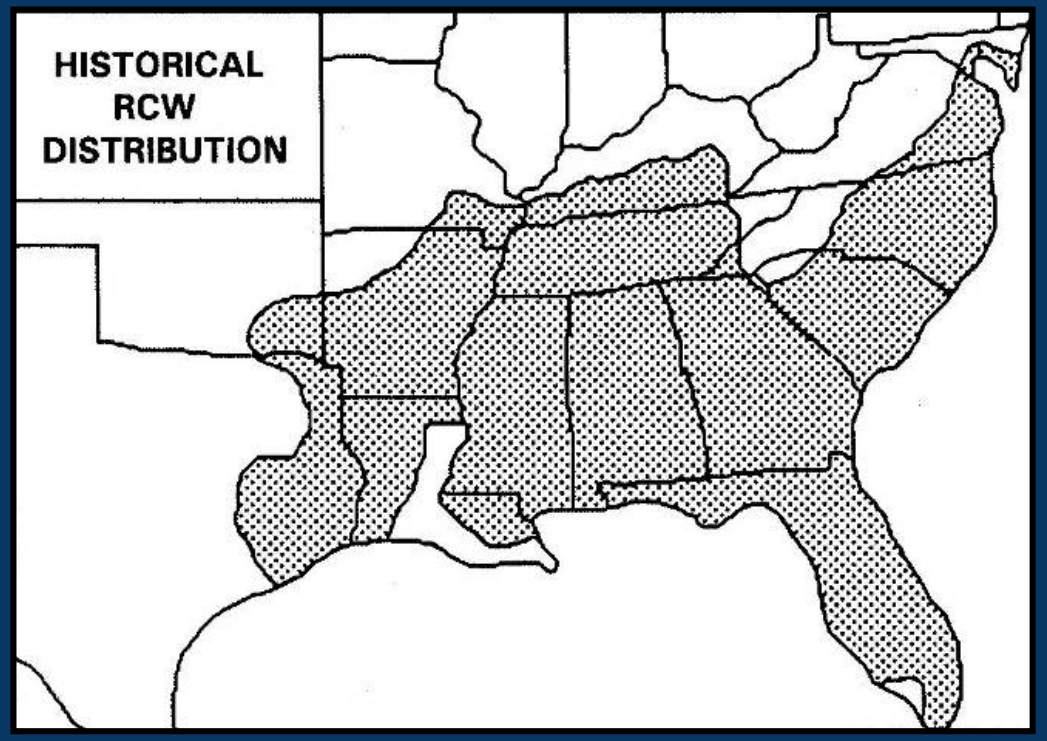
Population Trends

- Pre-European settlement – 920,000 – 1.5 M territories
- At time of listing – fewer than 10,000 individuals (1,000 – 3,500 clusters)
- 1995 – 4,700 clusters
- Today – at least 7,800 clusters

Species Description

- Small woodpecker – adults measure 20 to 23 cm
- Adults (M & F) are black and white
- Red “cockade”
- Cooperative breeding system
- Nests and roosts in cavities excavated from living pine trees
- Historical range may have been over 200 million acres (90 million acres longleaf pine)

Habitat



- Large, old pines needed for nesting and roosting
- Cavity trees in open stands with little hardwood midstory or overstory
- Diverse herbaceous ground cover

- Open, fire-maintained pine ecosystems
- Primarily longleaf pine, but also shortleaf/loblolly, and other pines

Biology

- Cooperative breeders – live in groups that share and defend territories year-round
- Group consists of single breeding pair + helpers
- Helpers participate in incubation of eggs, rearing young, territory defense, and cavity excavation
- Helpers provide pool of replacement breeders
- Young birds disperse in first year, or some males remain on natal territory and become helpers
- Nest and roost in cavities year-round
- Cavity tree cluster – aggregation of cavity trees with nest cavity + roost cavities
- Cavity excavation is extremely difficult (for example, median time = 13 yrs in longleaf)
- Foraging – arthropod abundance related to age/density of pines and condition of groundcover.

Risk factors

- Lack of suitable habitat
- Natural disturbances (e.g. hurricanes, wildfire)
- Small, fragmented populations
- Conservation-reliant species

Historical Habitat Loss

- Logging & turpentine industry
- Fire suppression
- Conversion to urban and agriculture

- Only about 3% longleaf pine remained
- Forest young and dense; substantial hardwood component
- Trees mostly not mature enough for natural cavity excavation
- Silvicultural practices and fire suppression hindered development of habitat

Conservation Management

- Artificial cavities – install and maintain
- Create new territories w/ recruitment clusters
- Forest management to sustain, restore, and increase habitat
- Translocation of subadults
- Monitoring

RCW is management reliant – these actions must continue for species to persist

Species Status Assessment Report
Current Condition:
Resiliency

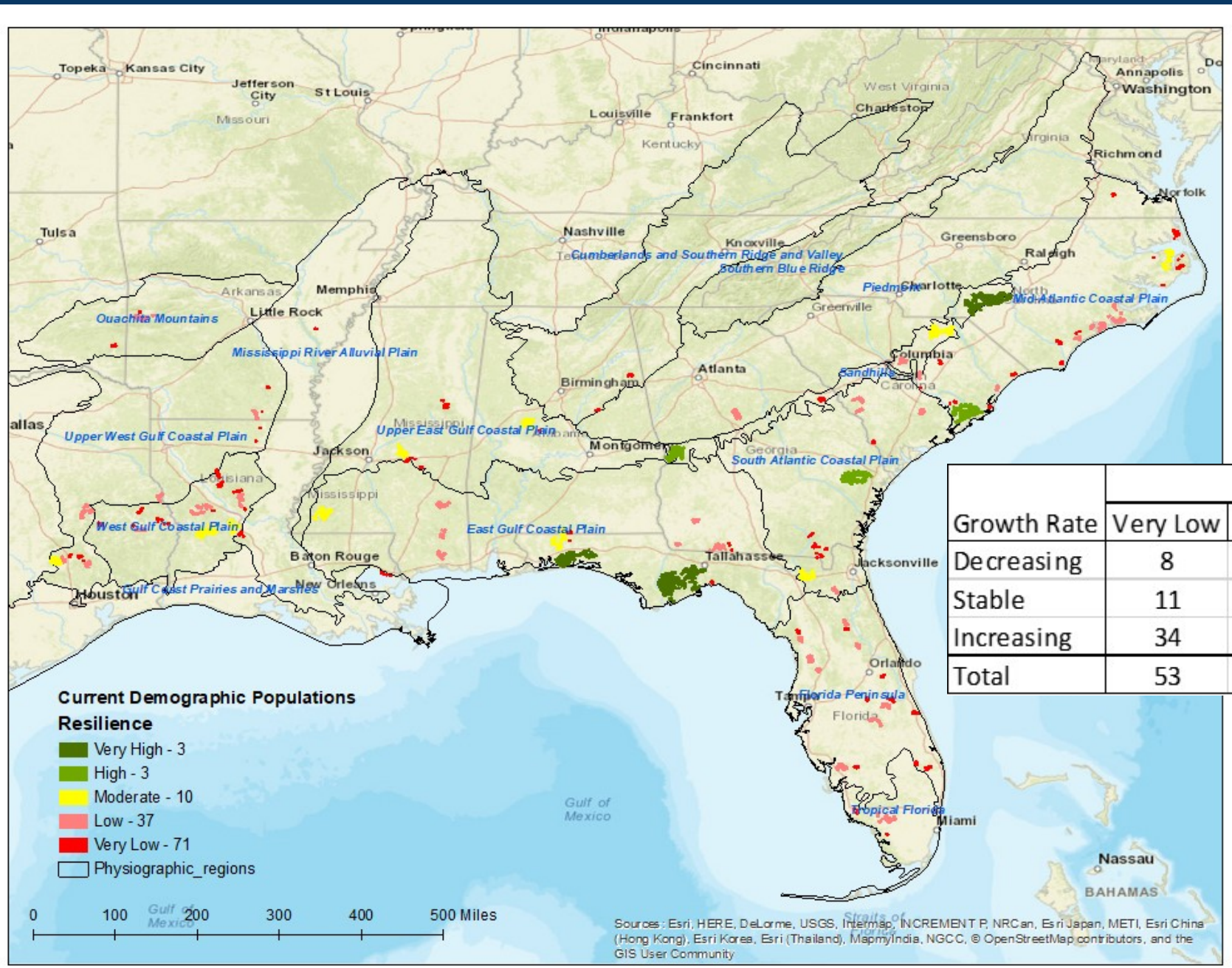
SSA identified 124 demographic populations; 98 with associated growth rates

Resiliency measured by population size:

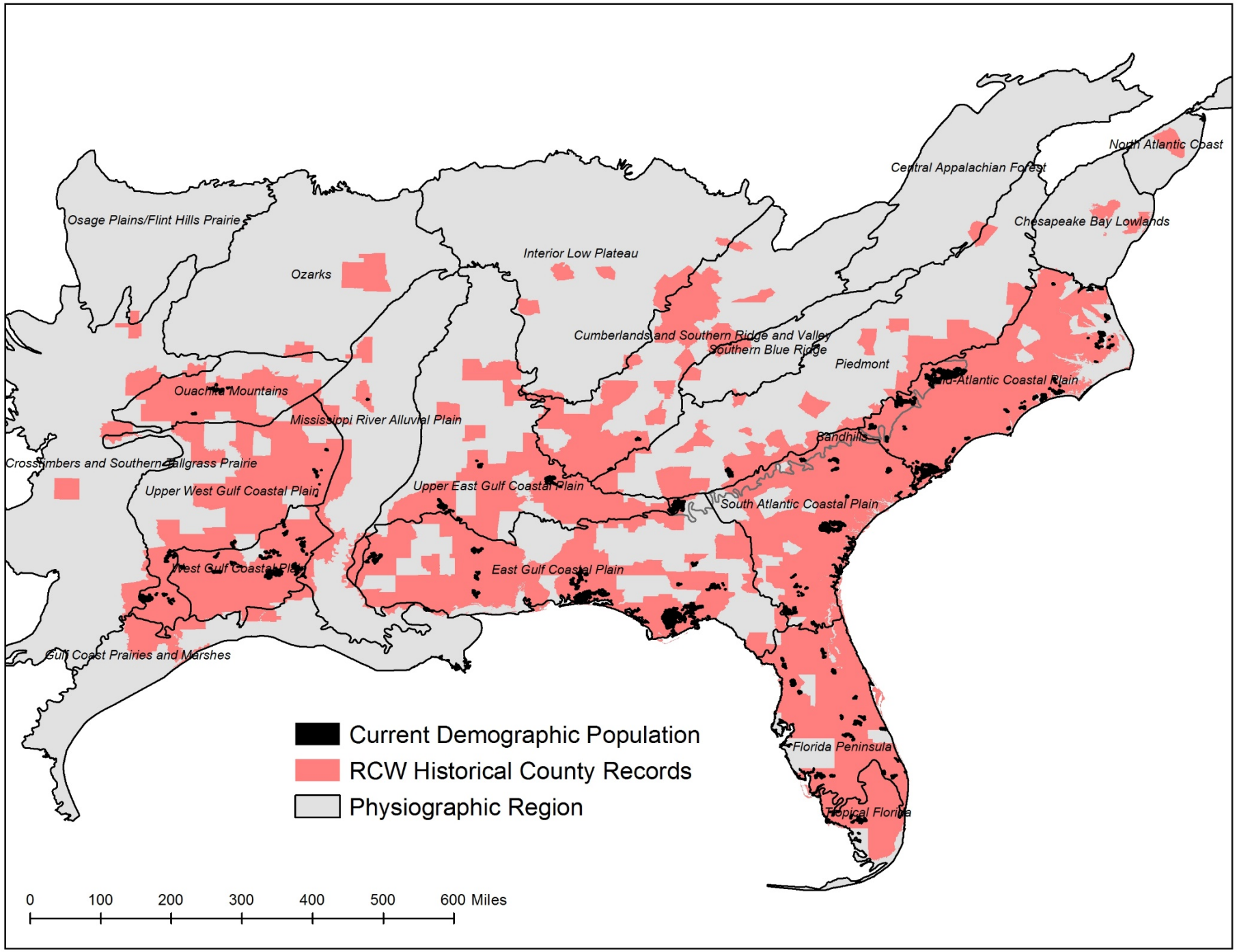
Baseline Resilience Population Size Class	<30 Very Low	30-99 Low	100-249 Moderate	250-499 High	>499 Very High

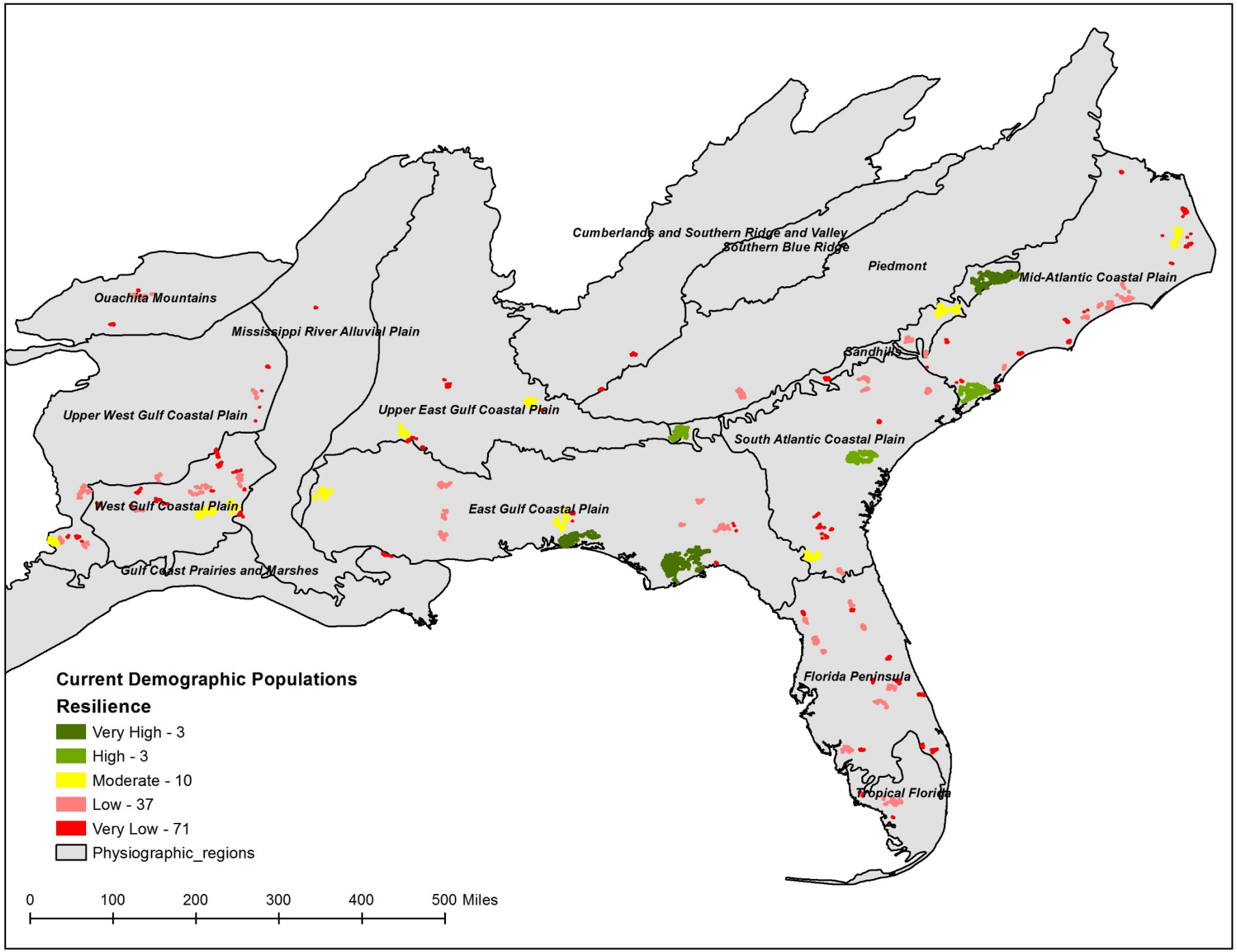
And growth rates:

decreasing ($\lambda < 1.000$)
stable ($\lambda = 1.000 – 1.020$)
increasing ($\lambda > 1.020$)

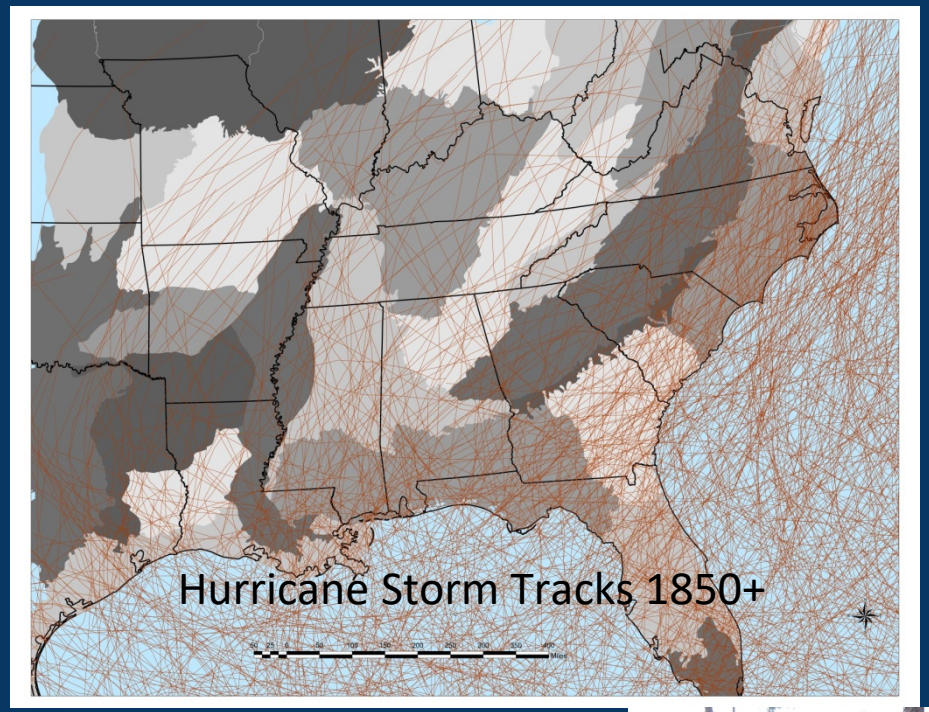


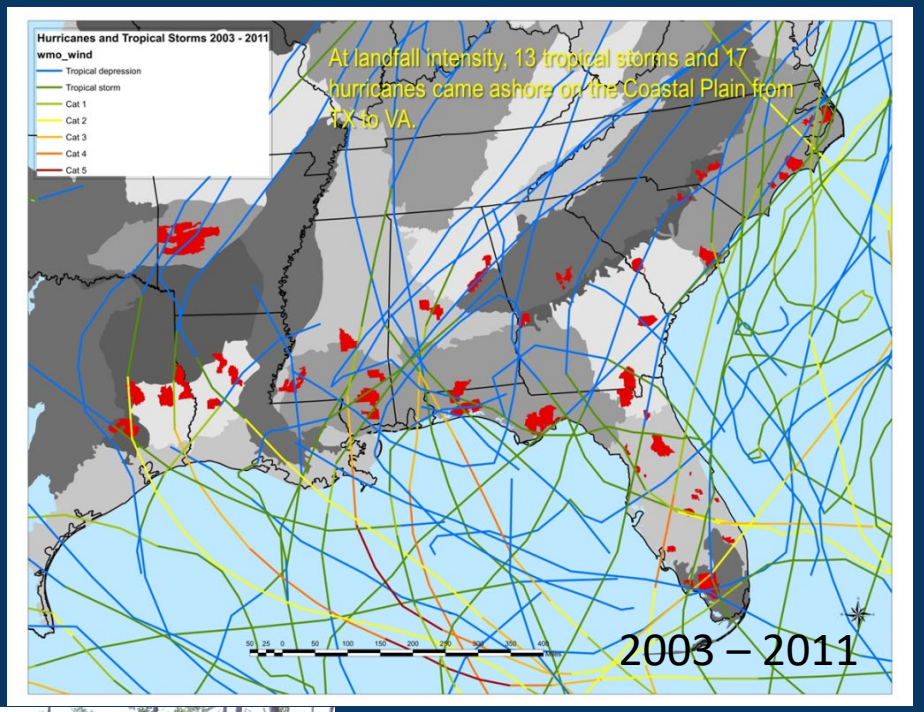
	Baseline Resilience Class					
Growth Rate	Very Low	Low	Moderate	High	Very High	Total
Decreasing	8	5	0	0	0	13
Stable	11	4	3	0	1	19
Increasing	34	24	4	3	1	66
Total	53	33	7	3	2	98


Osage Plains/Flint Hills Prairie
Ozarks
Interior Low Plateau
Central Appalachian Forest
North Atlantic Coast
Chesapeake Bay Lowlands
Cumberlands and Southern Ridge and Valley
Southern Blue Ridge
Piedmont
Mid-Atlantic Coastal Plain
Ouachita Mountains
Mississippi River Alluvial Plain
Sandhills
Cross Timbers and Southern Tallgrass Prairie
Upper West Gulf Coastal Plain
Upper East Gulf Coastal Plain
South Atlantic Coastal Plain
West Gulf Coastal Plain
East Gulf Coastal Plain
Gulf Coast Prairies and Marshes
Florida Peninsula
Tropical Florida
Current Demographic Population
RCW Historical County Records
Physiographic Region
0
100
200
300
400
500
600 Miles

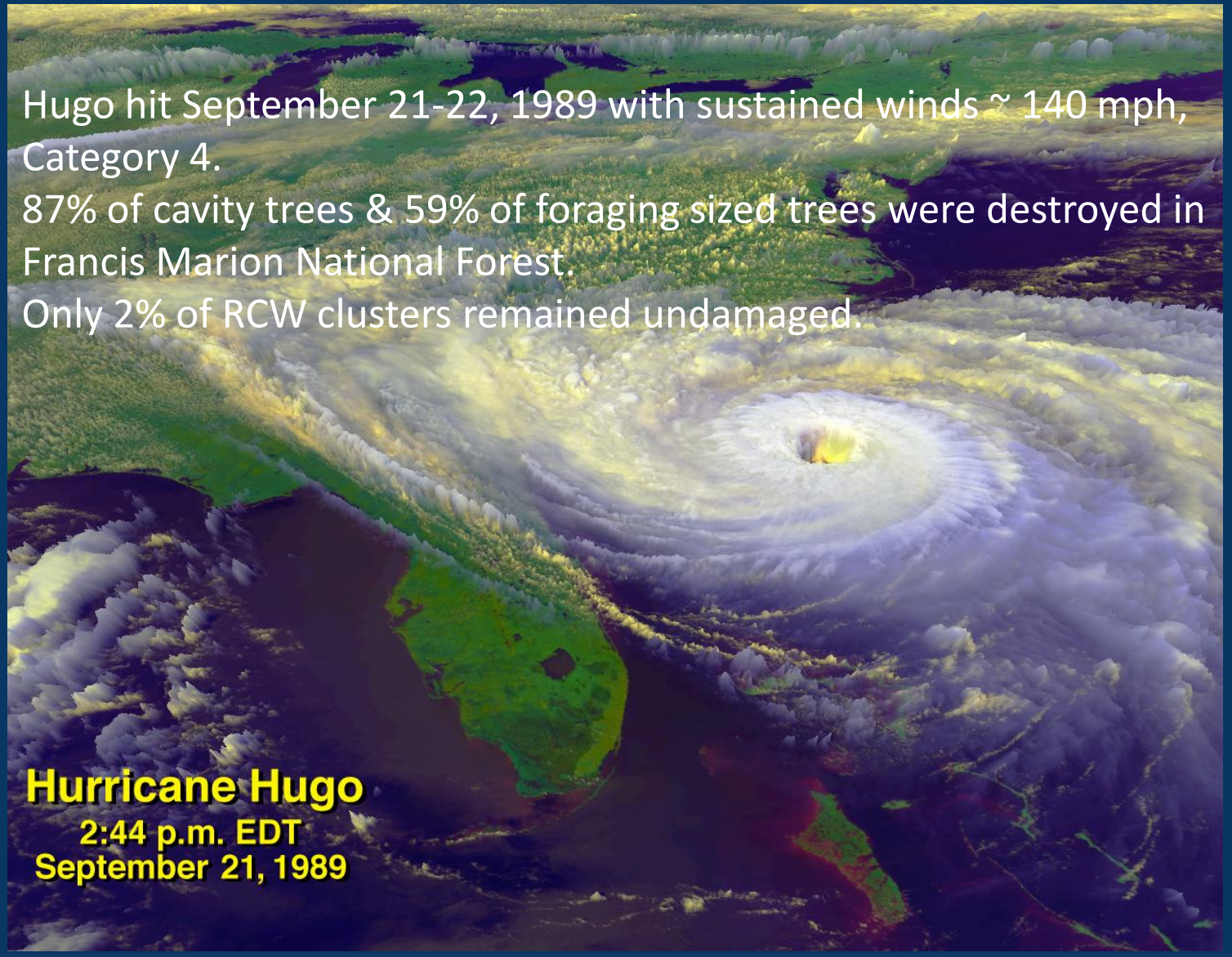

Cumberlands and Southern Ridge and Valley
Southern Blue Ridge
Piedmont
Mid-Atlantic Coastal Plain
Ouachita Mountains
Mississippi River Alluvial Plain
Sandhills
Upper West Gulf Coastal Plain
Upper East Gulf Coastal Plain
South Atlantic Coastal Plain
West Gulf Coastal Plain
East Gulf Coastal Plain
Gulf Coast Prairies and Marshes
Florida Peninsula
Tropical Florida
Current Demographic Populations
Resilience
Very High - 3
High - 3
Moderate - 10
Low - 37
Very Low - 71
Physiographic_regions
0
100
200
300
400
500 Miles

Redundancy – Spreading the Risk





Hurricane Hugo Experience



Post-storm recovery

Current Condition Summary

Resiliency

- 65 percent of RCW clusters in moderate to very high resiliency population
- Most populations (87%) showing stable or increasing growth rates
- Majority of populations still small – low or very low resiliency
  - Very low resiliency 57.3%
  - Low resiliency – 29.8%
  - Moderate resiliency – 8.1%
  - High resiliency – 2.4%
  - Very high resiliency – 2.4%

Representation

- Originally in 19 ecoregions
- Currently 13 ecoregions
- Representation hasn't changed since 2003 recovery plan

Redundancy

- 4 of 13 ecoregions have high or very-high resiliency populations
- High redundancy of moderate, low, and very-low populations
- Highest number of populations in coastal ecoregions – increased hurricane threat

Future Scenarios

Low

- No or very little RCW-specific management
- Some baseline habitat management would continue (e.g. prescribed fire)

Medium

- Assumes an average of past management parameters will continue

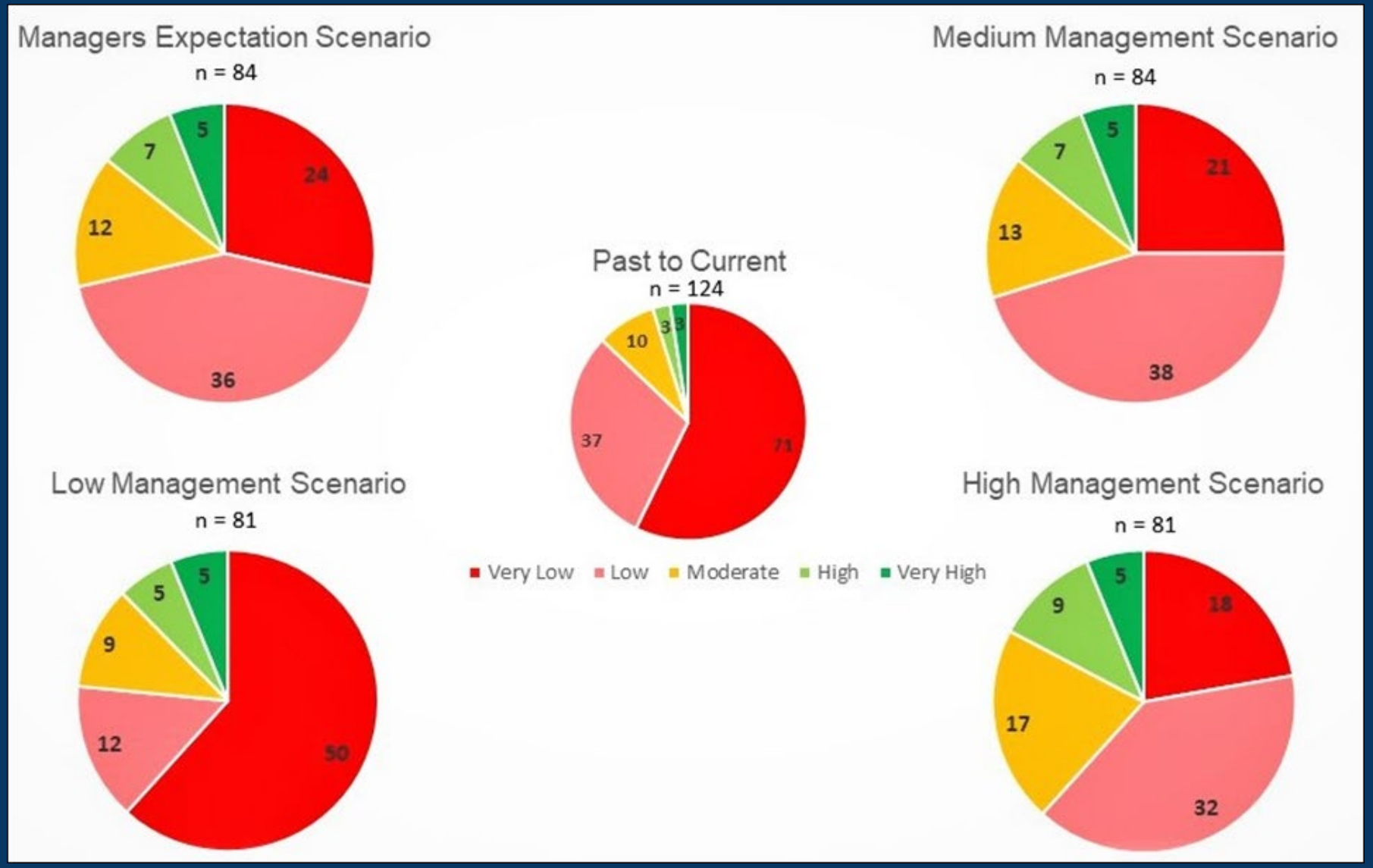
High

- Assumes more intense and extensive management

Managers Expectation

- Expert opinion by managers of what is most likely future management

Future Population Resilience by Management Scenario



Future Representation and Redundancy

- All management scenarios – five populations in four ecoregions are very high resiliency (EGCP, MACP, SACP, SH).
- Manager's Expectation and Medium scenarios – seven populations in five ecoregions are high resiliency. (EGCP, MACP, SACP, SH, WGCP, UWGCP)
  - High and very high resiliency populations more widely distributed among ecoregions
- Low scenario – four ecoregions continue to only have low or very low resiliency populations. (CRV, GCPM, OM, P).

Future Scenarios Summary

- Simulations demonstrated extent to which RCW is a conservation-reliant species
- All scenarios – most populations are still in very low, low, and moderate resiliency categories
- All but low scenario – populations are stable or increasing
- Low scenario – without adequate species-specific management little progress will be made
- High scenario – limitation of current land base and carrying capacity
- Medium scenario – small populations preserved and more populations become moderate to very high resiliency

Recovery Plan

- Recovery criteria based on 39 designated populations
  - 13 Primary Core
  - 10 Secondary Core
  - 16 Essential Support
- Each population has a population size objective
- Distributed within 11 recovery units (= ecoregions)

Six downlisting criteria – three have been met; three have been partially met. *The population size objective has been achieved for 15 of 20 populations required for downlisting.*

Five delisting criteria – two have been partially met; three have not been met. *Twelve of the 29 required populations have fulfilled their population size objectives.*

Red-cockaded Woodpecker Determination:

- Endangered – any species which is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range.

- Threatened – any species which is likely to become an endangered species within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range.

Red-Cockaded Woodpecker Determination

Conditions have improved:

- Increased number and distribution of populations
- 65% of clusters are in moderate to very high resiliency populations
- Trends are improving - 87% of populations stable or increasing

No longer in danger of extinction

Species still faces a variety of stressors:

- Majority of populations are still small
- Legacy stressors – insufficient number of cavities, habitat fragmentation, lack of suitable foraging habitat
- Species is management-reliant

Is likely to become in danger of extinction within the foreseeable future (threatened)

Red-cockaded Woodpecker Proposed 4(d) rule

What is a section 4(d) rule?

- Special rule to provide regulatory flexibility
- Applies to threatened species only
- Provides protections to threatened species
- Allows activities that cause minor adverse effects or beneficial effects to continue
- Focus efforts on the threats that make a difference to the species' conservation
- Streamlines compliance with the ESA

RCW proposed 4(d) rule

Prohibitions -

- Incidental take resulting from:
  - Damage or conversion of currently-occupied habitat to other land uses
  - Forest management practices that result in long-term conditions not able to support RCW
  - Activities that render active cavity trees unusable
  - Operation of vehicles or equipment in active cluster during breeding season
  - Use of insecticides or herbicides on any standing pine tree within ½ mile of an active cluster
  - Installation of artificial cavities
  - Inspecting cavity contents
- Intentional take, including capturing, handling, and similar activities
- Other standard prohibitions

RCW proposed 4(d) rule

Exceptions -

- ❖ Take incidental to an otherwise lawful activity caused by
  - Activities and conservation practices carried out in accordance with a Service- or State-approved management plan providing for red-cockaded woodpecker conservation
  - Operation of vehicles or other activities in active cavity tree cluster during the breeding season for safety and operational needs of existing infrastructure or are ongoing routine activities
  - RCW management and military training activities on Department of Defense installations with a Service-approved integrated natural resources management plan.
- ❖ Other standard exceptions

Public comment period

- Service seeks new scientific and commercial information about the red-cockaded woodpecker
- Following this meeting, a virtual public hearing will allow participants to comment on the proposed rule.
- All documents relating to this proposed rule can be found at http://www.regulations.gov under Docket No. FWS-R4-ES-2019-0018
- A copy of this presentation is also available at: https://www.fws.gov/southeast/wildlife/birds/red-cockaded-woodpecker/#recovery-plan-section

We will accept comments received or postmarked on or before December 7, 2020.

The public can submit comments at http://www.regulations.gov under Docket No. FWS-R4-ES-2019-0018.

We will now take questions

Questions only; comments can be made during the public hearing that follows this informational meeting.

Comments made during this informational meeting will not be included in the record.

Comments must be made during the public hearing, or submitted to www.regulations.gov