



Regional Sustainable Land Use Workshop

Sustainable Sandhills was awarded a 3 year grant by the USEPA's Collaborative Network for Sustainability program in July, 2005. The Sustainable Sandhills Regional Land Use project goal is to integrate sustainability planning into the day-to-day operations of the governments and communities in the Sandhills. The North Carolina Sandhills region is defined as an eight county area: Cumberland, Harnett, Hoke, Lee, Montgomery, Moore, Richmond, and Scotland – approximately 2.5 million acres of land. The land of these counties contains the entire Sandhills/Longleaf Pine ecosystem in North Carolina, considered one of the 21 most endangered ecosystems in the United States.

As in much of the Southeastern U.S., robust population growth is significantly impacting the infrastructure and landscape in the Sandhills. The following examples are some of the recent impacts that affect the long-term sustainability of the region:

- The region recently received its first non-attainment deferred designation for poor air quality. Cumberland County was designated by EPA as a non-attainment deferred area for the 8-hour ozone standard. An agreement was made between NCDENR and local governments to significantly improve air quality in Cumberland County by 2007.
- A recent four-year drought resulted in emergency connections between water supply systems, mandatory water-use restrictions, and the threat of water system failure in many parts of the region.
- Three of the counties are considered "Tier 1 or 2" communities, meaning they are the most economically distressed based on population growth, unemployment rate, and income.
- The pressure to develop farmland and forests for suburban development is fragmenting the Sandhills' unique longleaf pine ecosystem, reducing the amount of natural area needed to sustain rare and endangered plants, animals and natural communities, as well as open space for communities.
- The recent Base Closure and Realignment action (November 2005) will result in an additional population increase for the region. Adjusted estimates for population growth in the Sandhills by year 2030 are now as high as 250,000 new residents.

A coordinated approach to economic development, and cultural and natural resource preservation and enhancement is needed to maintain and improve the quality of life in the Sandhills.

Sustainable Sandhills is participating in ongoing regional efforts to conserve land in the Sandhills region sponsored by the Regional Land Use Advisory Commission (RLUAC) and the NC Sandhills Conservation Partnership (NCSCP). These partnerships have made valuable contributions to fostering a regional approach to land use planning. Our project is building on these efforts, creating an integrated, systems-oriented Regional Land Use Decision Support Tool. It will incorporate community input on economic, environmental, and social concerns with the results of the previous regional land use efforts.

The Decision Support Tool

This project will create a GIS model of land suitability to balance development, conservation and cultural interests. **The model is intended to enhance each local community's ability to assess the implications of the land use priorities they develop.** The project requires a unique collection of data because of the bounds of the ecosystem and because no other organization or political entity coincides with the eight county region. Thanks to a partnership with the Sandhills GIS Association and the NC Department of Commerce's Division of Community Assistance, Sustainable Sandhills has access to a comprehensive Sandhills GIS database with annually updated and integrated GIS data sets.

Maps and statistics produced by the model will inform local and regional planning processes and the land use decisions that affect sustainability. The model will:

- Use data developed and maintained by regional partners as well as data readily available from state sources (NC One Map).
- Integrate GIS data layers that depict land cover, land use, natural resources, environmentally sensitive areas, protected areas, infrastructure, developed areas, socioeconomic characteristics, cultural and historic resources, and other themes relevant to a sustainable future;
- Integrate layers in ways that will be transparent and explainable;
- Incorporate criteria for selecting, rating, ranking, and weighting the layers generated by the planners, decision makers, and community representatives in the set of planning workshops;
- Enable users to test scenarios; and
- Produce output (maps and statistics) that will be easily accessible, meaningful, reliable, and simple enough to guide plans and decisions.

The Workshop

This is the first year of the three year grant project. Input to the modeling process will be gathered at a series of 90 minute workshops – at least one held in each of the 8 Sandhills counties in the summer and fall of 2006. Input on suitability for 6 land use types will be solicited:

- 3 DEVELOPMENT types – industrial, commercial and residential.
- 3 CONSERVATION types – farms, working forests and natural land.

Interested participants can stay involved by attending focus group meetings later this year on each of the above land use types. Participants do NOT need to have a technical background in Planning or GIS, just an interest in the future of their community. We are currently scheduling workshops in each of the eight Sandhills counties and value all constructive input to the project!

For more information contact:

Jon Parsons, P.E.
Executive Director, Sustainable Sandhills
PO Box 144, Fayetteville NC 28302
910-484-9098 office, 910-323-1028 fax
jonparsons@sustainablesandhills.org
www.sustainablesandhills.org