BOILING SPRING LAKES, N.C., Sept. 23 (AP) — Over the past six months, landowners here have been clear-cutting thousands of trees to keep them from becoming homes for the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker.

The chain saws started in February, when the federal Fish and Wildlife Service put Boiling Spring Lakes on notice that rapid development threatened to squeeze out the woodpecker.

The agency issued a map marking 15 active woodpecker “clusters,” and announced it was working on a new one that could potentially designate whole neighborhoods of this town in southeastern North Carolina as protected habitat, subject to more-stringent building restrictions.

Hoping to beat the mapmakers, landowners swarmed City Hall to apply for lot-clearing permits. Treeless land, after all, would not need to be set aside for woodpeckers. Since February, the city has issued 368 logging permits, a vast majority without accompanying building permits.

The results can be seen all over town. Along the roadsides, scattered brown bark is all that is left of pine stands. Mayor Joan Kinney has watched with dismay as waterfront lots across from her home on Big Lake have been stripped down to sandy wasteland.

“It’s ruined the beauty of our city,” Ms. Kinney said. To stop the rash of cutting, city commissioners have proposed a one-year moratorium on lot-clearing permits.

The red-cockaded woodpecker was once abundant in the vast longleaf pine forests that stretched from New Jersey to Florida, but now numbers as few as 15,000. The bird is unusual among North American woodpeckers because it nests exclusively in living trees.

In a quirk of history, human activity has made this town of about 4,100 almost irresistible to the bird.
Long before there was a town, locals carved V-shaped notches in the pines, collecting the sap in buckets to make turpentine. These wounds allowed fungus to infiltrate the tree’s core, making it easier for the woodpecker to excavate its nest hole and probe for the beetles, spiders and wood-boring insects it prefers.

“And, voilà! You have a perfect woodpecker habitat,” said Dan Bell, project director for the Nature Conservancy in nearby Wilmington.

The woodpecker gouges a series of holes around the tree, creating “sap runs” to discourage the egg-gobbling black snake, the bird’s chief enemy. Because it can take up to six years to excavate a single nest hole, the birds fiercely defend their territory, said Susan Miller, a biologist for the Fish and Wildlife Service. “They’re passed from generation to generation, because it’s such a major investment in time to create one cavity,” Ms. Miller said.

Like the woodpeckers, humans are also looking to defend their nest eggs.

Bonner Stiller has been holding on to two wooded half-acre lakefront lots for 23 years. He stripped both lots of longleaf pines before the government could issue its new map.

“They have finally developed a value,” said Mr. Stiller, a Republican member of the state General Assembly. “And then to have that taken away from you?”

Landowners have overreacted, says Pete Benjamin, supervisor of the federal agency’s Raleigh office.

Having a woodpecker tree on a piece of property does not necessarily mean a house cannot be built there, Mr. Benjamin said. A landowner can even get permission to cut down a cavity tree, as long as an alternative habitat can be found.

“For the most part, we've found ways to work with most folks,” he said.