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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to scale back endangered red wolf program in NC, send some animals to zoos

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Only 200 red wolves live in captivity, far short of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's goal of 400. Another 45 wild wolves live in eastern North

At this moment, on millions of acres in northeastern North Carolina, 45 endangered red wolves are living much like their ancestors did hundreds of years ago: Hunting for deer and rabbits, hanging out with their mates, raising their kits.

But by 2018, a third of these wolves — the entire wild species — will be relocated [2] from their native lands in five counties to just one: Dare, near the federal bombing range and in part of the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge. The rest of the wild wolves, at least those that can be trapped, will be shipped to zoos throughout the United States to live in captivity.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced this week [3] that it has failed to adequately protect the red wolf, which was declared endangered in 1967. Without a new recovery plan, the species will become extinct in possibly as few as eight years [4], and most certainly within the next 40. There are too few red wolves in zoos to sustain the species — about 225 — and even fewer in the wild.

"This is a better path for the red wolf," said Cindy Dohner, Southeast regional director of FWS. "It's not sustainable here."

So based on scientific recommendations of wildlife biologists and input from a deeply divided Red Wolf

Carolina, the lowest number since 2006. (Photo credit: John Froschauer, Point Defiance Zoo and Aquarium)

landowners in northeastern North Carolina Officials hope that by finding new sites in the wolves' historical range — now known to be a larger area of the Southeastern U.S. — they can eventually move captive wolves onto federal lands elsewhere and rebuild the species.

“I understand local landowners have had concerns in recent years,” said Kim Wheeler, executive director of the [Red Wolf Coalition](#) ^[6], based in Tyrrell County. “Their voice is as important as mine. But i do feel like this is Fish and Wildlife’s attempt to satisfy a few locals. It’s going to take dialogue, not just moving the animals around.”

Many advocates for the red wolves, including conservation biologists, are disappointed with the agency’s decision. “It’s awful and disastrous,” said Ron Sutherland, a conservation biologist from Durham. He was one of 500,000 people who petitioned FWS to save the wolf. “They’re basically giving up completely on maintaining a sustainable wildlife population and taking the politically easy task of growing the zoo population. The Dare County holding pen is just a smokescreen to shield the public from the fact they’re really giving up.”

“Initially we were glad they didn’t halt the program,” Wheeler said. “But I’m concerned that the red wolf recovery relies on the captive population.”

[Eight captive-born wolves were released](#) ^[7] into the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge in 1987. By the mid-2000s, the wolves were thriving. FWS seemed to be managing the species. There were with fewer coyote-wolf hybrids, often caused when the two species interbreed, usually because a breeding pair of wolves has been separated. Roughly 130 red wolves were living in the wild, the largest number in more than 40 years, and since well before the animals were on the brink of extinction.

Then conflicts between the agency and private landowners escalated. Wolves roamed on private land, with angered some property owners, particularly those distrustful of the federal government. Hunters and landowners began shooting the wolves, sometimes illegally. Last year, under pressure from a few landowners, FWS suspended the release of red wolves into the wild.

A review of nearly 300 pages of federal documents released along with the announcement reveals the acrimony within the FWS’ [red wolf recovery team](#) ^[8], an appointed group of scientists, landowners, and members of the North Carolina Wildlife Commission and the Farm Bureau.

“The loudest voices do not always represent large constituencies,” the document reads. One of the loudest voices is real estate developer Jett Ferebee, who was appointed to the red wolf recovery team as a landowner representative. He

owns more than a thousand acres in the wolves' territory, and leases it to farmers and hunters. He often posts vitriolic and unfounded comments about the program on nchuntandfish.com.

Often writing in all capital letters, Ferebee demanded that FWS end the entire recovery program in northeastern North Carolina. He said he opposes "questionable spending of taxpayer resources on an annual of questionable origins and the continued trampling of private landowner rights by FWS and non-governmental organizations."

(Sutherland, who was not on the recovery team, said conservation groups have offered to pay landowners in return for allowing red wolves to be released on their property. However, he added, FWS, while initially receptive, did not explore that option.)

Ferebee called the Point Defiance Zoo, which houses some red wolves, a "wolf manufacturing facility" and the entire wolf recovery program in northeastern North Carolina an "illegal experiment" and a "taxpayer scam."

On the other hand, scientists on the team vigorously supported continuing the program in some form, and disagreed that it had been a failure. "It was working several years ago, wrote Eric Gese of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. But while FWS waited for two years while the program was reviewed, the agency "essentially made the decision at that time to allow the program to degrade."

Gese went on to note that he opposed setting a precedent "that a minority of local landowners can get a national recovery program terminated."

Many also acknowledged that FWS failed to properly communicate with some landowners about releasing wolves on private land. "Humans are part of any ecosystem," wrote Sarah Long of the Lincoln Park Zoo. "They affect the wolf and the wolf affects them."

Several scientists believed that the program is viable in parts of the northeastern North Carolina. However, even more so than the landowner conflicts, climate change and sea level rise could doom the red wolf's habitat along the coast, wrote Christopher Serenari of the state wildlife commission. "This is my nail in the coffin for the NENC project."

Nationwide, there is not enough space in zoos for the 400 wolves that FWS officials says are necessary to rebuild the species. Reallocating money from the \$1.2 million agency budget could help create that space.

"I am hopeful that FWS will be mindful of removing a wild animal and putting it in a captive facility," Wheeler said. Some zoos put the wolves on display, which can stress an animal that has always lived in the wild. Other facilities have large pens, which more closely mimic a wild habitat, where, Wheeler added, "the wolf can have some privacy."

The last time FWS pursued a new site for the red wolf in the wild occurred in the 1990s, in the Great Smoky Mountains. That project, which involved 37 wolves, failed. Some of the wolves starved. Others left the park and hunted on private land, where, as in eastern North Carolina, they were killed by cars, poisoned or shot. Many of the wolves had to be recaptured and sent to zoos.

It's essential that in choosing new sites for the wild wolves, FWS doesn't make the same mistake. "I'm concerned about how will wolves stay on federal land without fences," Wheeler said. "Wolves don't know political boundaries.

"And the notion that you can move around captive and wild animals in a landscape — you break up the pack dynamics. You can't just move in another animal and think the pack is going to accept them."

Dohner of FWS said other potential relocation sites will have to be federal lands that have an appropriate habitat — a mix of hardwood forest and open space — that is sparsely populated with people. Northeastern North Carolina, characterized by wetlands, farms and now, cleared acreage from logging operations, is less hospitable to the wolf.

"There are better places ecologically," Sutherland said. But politically, FWS "torpedoed their own existing program and undercut their own legal arguments for doing it in North Carolina. It's unfathomable they could do it in another southeastern state."

In a separate case involving the wolves, a federal judge will hold a hearing this afternoon in Raleigh to consider a temporary injunction filed by the Southern Environmental Law Center ^[9] against FWS. If granted, the agency could not authorize any private citizen to trap or kill a red wolf. In the past year, FWS has granted two take permits, an unprecedented move. In one case, trappers captured a wolf, held it in captivity, then released it in the Alligator National Wildlife Refuge, outside its pack territory. "It wandered around and then was hit by a car," said attorney Derb Carter, director of the SELC. "We want to stop all of that."

The recovery plan must go through a public comment period and rule making before it is formalized. If it is approved, by December 2017, the agency will have determined potential new sites for the wild wolves and how to fund the zoo portion of the plan. Until then, FWS will maintain the wolves as usual.

"It's not going to be an easy process," Wheeler said. "But just because it's hard doesn't mean it's not worthwhile."

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- [2] will be relocated: <https://www.fws.gov/redwolf/docs/recommended-decisions-in-response-to-red-wolf-recovery-program-evaluation.pdf>
- [3] announced this week: https://www.fws.gov/news/ShowNews.cfm?ref=science-leads-fish-and-wildlife-service-to-significant-changes-for-red-&_ID=35794
- [4] extinct in possibly as few as eight years: <https://www.fws.gov/redwolf/docs/red-wolf-population-viability-analysis-faust-et-al-2016.pdf>
- [5] FWS is scaling back the number of wild wolves : <https://www.fws.gov/redwolf/evaluation.html>
- [6] Red Wolf Coalition: <http://redwolves.com/wp>
- [7] Eight captive-born wolves were released: <http://www.ncpolicywatch.com/2016/09/02/a-timeline-of-north-carolinas-endangered-red-wolves/>
- [8] red wolf recovery team: <https://www.fws.gov/redwolf/docs/red-wolf-recovery-team-recommendations-facilitated-by-group-solutions-inc.pdf>
- [9] Southern Environmental Law Center : <https://www.southernenvironment.org>

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