

Summit to weigh endangered red wolf's plight as numbers drop

July 21 2015, by Jim Salter

Wolf experts from around the nation will be gathering this week to consider how to help the critically endangered red wolf.

The red wolf population in the wild, all in eastern North Carolina, has dropped to about 50 from 100 in the past five years, officials at the St. Louis Endangered Wolf Center said Tuesday. The matter took on more urgency recently when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service suspended the reintroduction of captive wolves into the wild until it could study the value of the release program.

Experts meeting Wednesday through Friday in suburban St. Louis will make breeding and relocation recommendations, discuss population viability and hear from government officials involved with the reintroduction program.

Red wolves once roamed much of the eastern third of the U.S., from the Ohio River Valley into Missouri and as far south as Texas and Florida. The red wolf was designated as endangered in 1967, and the Fish and Wildlife Service began efforts to save the species.

Major threats to red wolves are hunters who mistake them for coyotes, and the belief they are dangerous and aggressive toward humans, said Virginia Busch, executive director of the Endangered Wolf Center.

"Educating the public and dispelling misconceptions about 'the big bad wolf' is vital if we are to ensure their long term viability," Busch said.

The red wolf was declared extinct in the wild in 1980, when only 14 pure red wolves remained to begin breeding programs, said Busch. Four pairs of red wolves were released into North Carolina's Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge in 1987, and remains the only place in the world where red wolves exist in the wild.

Cindy Dohner, southeast regional director for the Fish and Wildlife Service, said in June that suspending reintroduction is part of "our commitment to get the science right, rebuild trust with our neighbors in those communities, our state partners and many stakeholders as we address issues regarding the overall recovery of the red wolf."

The Fish and Wildlife Service said nearly 200 red wolves exist in captive breeding facilities. That includes four at the Endangered Wolf Center.

Busch said about 30 members of the Red Wolf Species Survival Plan will attend the conference. They represent zoos, research centers and other agencies from around the country.

"It is incumbent on us both to continue our efforts to sustain the population, as well as ramp up education and public understanding about the need to save these amazing animals," she said in a statement.

The Endangered Wolf Center is a nonprofit founded in 1971 by zoologist Marlin Perkins, a St. Louis native best known as the host of TV's "Mutual of Omaha Wild Kingdom," who died in 1986.

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