

Are North Carolina's red wolves a real species? The answer could doom them

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Changes to the Endangered Species Act proposed by the Trump administration could end federal protection of the three dozen remaining red wolves in North Carolina, wildlife advocates say.

Among their many changes, the proposals announced last week would let federal authorities consider economic impacts in deciding whether to add or remove [species](#) from the endangered and threatened lists. The proposals were among recent attacks on the 1973 law "on a scale not seen in decades," according to The New York Times.

But another provision seems aimed squarely at the red wolf: Is it a distinct species or, as critics in North Carolina have long contended, a hybrid of [gray wolves](#) and coyotes?

The administration's proposal says species already on the endangered list can be removed if new information or analysis shows they aren't a "valid taxonomic entity." A study of the red wolf is already underway.

In March, Congress ordered the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to get an independent analysis of whether red wolves and Mexican gray wolves are real species and subspecies, respectively. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine will name an expert panel to review scientific literature and report back next March.

Ron Sutherland, a Durham-based conservation scientist with the Wildlands Network, said the species provision echoes past comments by

wolf critics. At the urging of U.S. Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., a Senate committee last fall asked the Fish and Wildlife Service to end the 32-year effort to save red wolves in the wild.

The Trump administration's proposal "seems much more politically motivated and targeted toward the red wolf and other species that have been attacked by industry groups," Sutherland said. "I would agree that the (act) needs to be updated to reflect complicated genetic realities, but the people doing the revisions shouldn't be the ones talking for decades about getting rid of the act."

Red wolves were listed as endangered in 1967, before the act was adopted, and declared extinct in the wild in 1980. In 1986, the federal agency started an experiment to recover them by releasing captive-raised wolves into North Carolina's coastal Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge.

Their numbers peaked at 120 to 130 in 2006 but have dropped sharply since then, largely because of shootings. About 35 wolves now roam a five-county area, but private landowners have complained about them. Last month the Fish and Wildlife Service proposed allowing wolves that are outside federal land to be killed.

The proposals announced last week, which will be open to public comment for 60 days, say the same definition of species that is used to protect animals and plants would also be used to remove protection.

Asked whether that could result in protection being removed from red wolves, a Fish and Wildlife Service official said the agency's intention is "to avoid the goalposts being moved for listed species that are recovered.

"We want to ensure that everyone is clear that one standard (of being in danger of extinction or likely to become so in the foreseeable future) is

used to list and delist," public affairs chief Gavin Shire said by email. Higher criteria couldn't be applied in order to keep protection for species that no longer need it, he said.

Sierra Weaver, an attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center in Chapel Hill, doubts that the proposal would remove protection for [red wolves](#). The Fish and Wildlife Service has long considered the [wolves](#) a species, she said. In April, the agency confirmed that recognition but added that there remains "considerable scientific uncertainty."

Other aspects of the administration proposals are more worrisome, Weaver said. Among them are changes to preserving habitat for endangered species and calculating the damage from federal projects such as highways.

"The scope of these proposals is massive, so massive it's hard to know how they'll affect any particular species," she said. "They're targeting the way we have known and implemented the Endangered Species Act for decades."

Sixty-seven species that are known or believed to occur in North Carolina now have federal protection. Nearly half are plants, including the Schweinitz's sunflower found in the Charlotte area. Animals on the list range from 300-pound loggerhead sea turtles to a dainty butterfly called the Saint Francis' satyr.

In announcing the proposed changes last week, federal officials said they're intended to streamline species protection while meeting the administration's mandate to cut regulations.

"The Trump administration is dedicated to being a good neighbor and being a better partner with the communities in which we operate," Fish and Wildlife Deputy Director Greg Sheehan said in a statement. "One

thing we heard over and over again was that ESA implementation was not consistent and often times very confusing to navigate. We are proposing these improvements to produce the best conservation results for the species while reducing the regulatory burden on the American people."

The species provision "is directly aiming the crosshairs at the red wolf," said Asheville-based attorney Perrin de Jong of the Center for Biological Diversity. But he said other aspects of the administration proposal could make it harder to add species to the endangered list.

In April the center sued the Fish and Wildlife Service for not deciding whether to protect two rare species found only in eastern North Carolina. They're the Carolina madtom, a small catfish found in the Tar River, and an aquatic salamander called the Neuse River waterdog. The center had petitioned the federal agency to list them in 2010 but no decision has been made.

Allowing the agency to consider the economic costs of protecting the animals, as the administration proposes, wouldn't likely favor the madtom and waterdog, de Jong said. Unfinished parts of Raleigh's beltway, Interstate 540, would cross the waterdog's last best habitat.

"The Endangered Species Act is strong because it requires decisions to be made on the best available science," he said. "When economic considerations become part of the equation, science takes a back seat."

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