

Federal agency withdraws plan that would all but end protection for red wolves in NC

November 15 2021, by Adam Wagner



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Days after announcing that it will withdraw a 2018 proposal that would have shrunk the northeastern North Carolina area where red wolves are protected by some 90%, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service now says it

plans to release nine wolves from captivity this winter.

The announcement came in response to a [federal lawsuit](#) that the Southern Environmental Law Center filed on behalf of the Red Wolf Coalition, Defenders of Wildlife and Animal Welfare Institute.

The lawsuit accuses the FWS of violating the Endangered Species Act by not releasing more [wolves](#) into the wild.

Sierra Weaver, a Southern Environmental Law Center senior attorney, said the FWS announced during a pretrial hearing that it will release two pairs of wolves in northeastern North Carolina's Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge this winter, and a group of five more wolves into the Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge.

Weaver said, "When the program started back in 1987, they similarly released four pairs of wolves and they had reproduction immediately, that first year, which really set the stage for the future of the reintroduction."

The Fish and Wildlife Service did not respond to a request for comment on Friday.

Considered the world's most endangered [wolf](#), the red wolf was first considered endangered in 1967. Efforts to reintroduce the wolf starting in 1987 were generally considered a success, according to people who have worked on the issue, with the wild population peaking at 120 to 130 wolves in North Carolina in 2006. Since then, the number of wolves has plummeted, with threats including people shooting or running over the wolves and the animals breeding with coyotes.

Now, the Fish and Wildlife Service knows eight wolves are alive on the Albemarle Peninsula, the only place with a known population in the

wild, and estimates that another seven to nine wolves are alive in the area. There are 241 [red wolves](#) in captivity.

Under the 2018 proposal, federal protection for the so-called nonessential experimental population would have shrunk from a five-county region on North Carolina's Albemarle Peninsula to only the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge and the Dare County Bombing Range—a roughly 90% reduction.

The Fish and Wildlife Service said in a [press release](#) that it is withdrawing the proposal due to "recent court decisions" around the wild wolves and due to public comments, which were overwhelmingly critical of the rule.

Conservation groups have long wondered what would come of the 2018 proposal, which was met by more than 100,000 critical comments.

"We are certainly encouraged by the withdrawal of that rule but recognize it is just a step in many steps forward to really give the red wolf an opportunity for recovery," said Kim Wheeler, executive director of the Red Wolf Coalition, based in Columbia, North Carolina.

Wheeler said releases of additional wolves from captivity are vital.

Had the 2018 proposal been enacted, management of the red wolf population would have shifted from trying to re-establish the wolves in the wild to "a semi-wild demonstration project," said Ron Sutherland, the chief scientist for the Wildlands Network, an environmental nonprofit.

Scientists estimated that the [wildlife](#) refuge and bombing range could have supported 10 to 15 wolves.

"You can't have a population of 10 to 15 animals and expect it to persist," Sutherland said. "There's no biological way that works." Sutherland said.

In the early 1990s, the FWS released eight wolves into the wild for five consecutive years.

But between 2014 and 2020, the FWS did not release any wolves, arguing that it was more important to grow the captive population. That led to the federal lawsuit, where [conservation groups](#) argued that not releasing wolves violated the Endangered Species Act.

As a result, the FWS released four adult wolves into the wild and fostered four pups into a pack this spring. Another pair of wolves were moved to Alligator River from St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge in Florida.

Sutherland said, "Over the last 10 years the Fish and Wildlife Service basically turned their backs on their own recovery program with that 2018 proposal basically being a culmination of that effort to essentially to give up on red wolves, try to make North Carolina's anti-red wolf people happy."

The wolves that were released this year are emblematic of the struggles facing the species, particularly with animals that were raised in captivity facing new threats in the wild. Five of the adults have died, Sutherland said, with four dying after being struck by vehicles and one shot while trying to break into a chicken coop. Of the pups, two have been seen on wildlife cameras and were believed to be alive as recently as October.

Some of the adult wolves wear orange collars that distinguish the animals from coyotes, ideally helping hunters avoid shooting them and allowing them to stand out on wildlife cameras. Those collars also help the FWS

track the wolves.

No red wolf pups have been born in the wild in any of the past three years, the first times that has happened since 1987. By releasing more wolves, and by releasing some who are already paired together, Weaver and others hope the population will stabilize and continue to grow again.

"What we're seeing this week, we hope, signifies a shift," Weaver said. "But the real change is when we see those animals back on the ground, those numbers, start to go back up again.."

©2021 The News & Observer.

Distributed at Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: Federal agency withdraws plan that would all but end protection for red wolves in NC (2021, November 15) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-11-federal-agency-red-wolves-nc.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.