

Press Release from the Defenders of Wildlife, Animal Welfare Institute, Red Wolf Coalition and Southern Environmental Law Center

For Immediate Release: November 5, 2018

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**Court Victory: Wild Red Wolves Get a Chance at Survival**  
***Court Stops U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service from Harming Wild Red Wolves***

CHAPEL HILL, N.C. – The U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of North Carolina today issued an order declaring that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service violated the Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Policy Act in its rollback of protections for the world's only wild population of red wolves living in eastern North Carolina. On behalf of Defenders of Wildlife, the Animal Welfare Institute and the Red Wolf Coalition, the Southern Environmental Law Center initiated the lawsuit in 2015.

Examining the agency's decisions to allow private landowners to shoot and kill non-problem red wolves, to end releases of red wolves, and to end active management of coyotes, the court found that "taken together, these actions go beyond the agency's discretion and operate to violate [the Service's] mandate to recover this species in the wild." The court also made permanent its September 29, 2016, order stopping the Service from capturing and killing, and authorizing private landowners to capture and kill wild red wolves.

"For four years now, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been dismantling one of the most successful predator reintroductions in U.S. history," said Sierra Weaver, senior attorney for the Southern Environmental Law Center. "The service knows how to protect and recover the red wolf in the wild, but it stopped listening to its scientists and started listening to bureaucrats instead. The law doesn't allow the agency to just walk away from species conservation, like it did here."

The groups brought the federal court action over the Fish and Wildlife Service's decision to allow red wolves that were not causing any problems to be shot and killed by private landowners, at the same time as it rolled back conservation measures that had helped red wolves grow from four pairs released in 1987, to over 100 animals in eastern North Carolina from 2002-2014. Since those management changes were made, the red wolf population has plummeted over the past four years to as few as 24 known red wolves in the wild today.

“Support for red wolf protection has been overwhelming,” said Jason Rylander, Senior Staff Attorney for Defenders of Wildlife. “But, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has ignored public support and moved forward with a proposal that will doom the species to extinction. Today’s decision by the court to protect red wolves from being shot and killed offers a glimmer of hope for species recovery and new energy to make this program successful once again.”

USFWS attempted to avoid a ruling in Conservation Groups’ lawsuit by proposing on June 27, 2018, a new rule to restrict wild red wolves to one National Wildlife Refuge and a bombing range in eastern North Carolina, while allowing the immediate killing of any wolves that live on or wander onto non-federal lands in what previously had been a designated 1.7 million acre five-county Red Wolf Recovery Area.

Conservation groups opposed this proposal, arguing instead for an alternative that would reinstate previous successful management measures. “Rolling back protections is the opposite of what this species needs,” said Kim Wheeler, executive director of the Red Wolf Coalition. “The court’s ruling today makes clear that the USFWS must recommit to red wolf recovery and resume its previously successful management policies and actions.”

The USFWS proposal would reduce the recovery area by almost 90 percent, eliminating protections for endangered red wolves from 1.5 million acres. In 2016, a group of 30 scientists condemned such a scenario because the limited area proposed by USFWS could not support a viable population of red wolves and its proposal was inconsistent with the best available science.

“The District Court’s ruling today makes it clear that USFWS’s recent management decisions have failed to protect the red wolf population,” said Johanna Hamburger, wildlife attorney for the Animal Welfare Institute. “Scientists have warned that if USFWS continues to ignore the recovery needs of the red wolf, these animals may once again be extinct in the wild by 2024. The court has ruled that this is unacceptable and that USFWS has a duty under the ESA to implement proactive conservation measures to achieve species recovery.”

According to the conservation groups, 99.9 percent of the 108,124 comments that the agency received on its proposed rule supported red wolf recovery in the wild. Only 19 comments—with 13 of these coming from a single real estate developer—supported USFWS’s proposal to restrict red wolves to only federal lands in Dare County.

The red wolf recovery program served as a model for reintroduction efforts and was widely celebrated as a success for 25 years before the service began ending its successful conservation actions. Once common throughout the Southeast, intensive predator control programs and loss of habitat drove the red wolf to extinction in the wild in the late 1970s. Later, red wolves bred in

captivity were reintroduced on a North Carolina peninsula within their native range in the late 1980s.

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**About the Red Wolf Coalition**

The Red Wolf Coalition ([www.redwolves.com](http://www.redwolves.com)) advocates for the long-term survival of red wolf populations by teaching about the red wolf and by fostering public involvement in red wolf conservation.

**About the Animal Welfare Institute**

The Animal Welfare Institute ([awionline.org](http://awionline.org)) is a nonprofit charitable organization founded in 1951 and dedicated to reducing animal suffering caused by people. AWI engages policymakers, scientists, industry, and the public to achieve better treatment of animals everywhere—in the laboratory, on the farm, in commerce, at home, and in the wild.

**About Defenders of Wildlife**

Defenders of Wildlife is dedicated to the protection of all native animals and plants in their natural communities. With more than 1.8 million members and activists, Defenders of Wildlife is a leading advocate for innovative solutions to safeguard our wildlife heritage for generations to come. For more information, visit [www.defenders.org](http://www.defenders.org).

**About the Southern Environmental Law Center**

For more than 30 years, the Southern Environmental Law Center has used the power of the law to champion the environment of the Southeast. With over 70 attorneys and nine offices across the region, SELC is widely recognized as the Southeast's foremost environmental organization and regional leader. SELC works on a full range of environmental issues to protect our natural resources and the health and well-being of all the people in our region. [www.SouthernEnvironment.org](http://www.SouthernEnvironment.org)