

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

October 27, 2020

The Honorable David Bernhardt
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Ms. Aurelia Skipwith
Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Mr. Leopoldo Miranda
Regional Director Southeast Region
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1875 Century Boulevard NE, Suite 400
Atlanta, GA 30345

Dear Secretary Bernhardt, Director Skipwith, and Regional Director Miranda:

We, the undersigned Members of Congress committed to the protection and preservation of endangered and threatened species, urge the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (“FWS”) to immediately take the steps necessary to conserve the wild population of the critically endangered American red wolf.

The FWS’s Red Wolf Recovery Program, developed in 1984, has been a national model¹ for successful species reintroduction, but changes in management strategies over the last five years have diminished the wild population to dangerous levels. The wild red wolf population, which consistently numbered over 100 wolves between 2002 and 2014, is now down to only nine collared wolves in the wild,² although recent reports indicate that number have may decreased even further to only seven collared wolves. This population decline has occurred despite the availability of proven conservation strategies, such as coyote sterilization and captive wolf reintroductions.

For six years, the FWS has not released any captive wolves into the wild population and has not resumed its prior proactive management of coyotes to address hybridization risks in the Red Wolf Recovery Area. Given that no red wolf reproduction has occurred in the wild for the past two breeding seasons, the continued inaction of the agency will precipitate the extinction of the red wolf in the wild. This is a clear violation of both the public trust and the Endangered Species Act.

As the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of North Carolina previously stated regarding red wolf conservation:

By designating the red wolf as protected and dedicating funding and efforts for more than twenty-five years in a program to rehabilitate the once-nearly extinct species, Congress has repeatedly demonstrated that it has chosen to preserve the red wolf—not simply to let inaction determine its fate—and it is not for this Court to permit activities that would have an effect counter to this goal.³

¹ US Fish & Wildlife Service (2020), <https://www.fws.gov/southeast/wildlife/mammals/red-wolf/#program-history-section>

² Madison, J. (2020), *Update on the North Carolina Nonessential Experimental Population (NEP)*, https://redwolves.com/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/ncnep_summary_july_2020.pdf

³ *Red Wolf Coal. v. N. Carolina Wildlife Res. Comm’n*, No. 2:13-CV-60-BO, 2014 WL 1922234, at *8 (E.D.N.C. May 13, 2014) (citing *Gibbs v. Babbitt*, 214 F.3d 483, 496 (4th Cir. 2000) (“It is for Congress to choose between inaction and preservation, not for the courts.”)).

The continued decline of this critically endangered species is unacceptable. Recent developments strengthen the scientific and legal basis for continued red wolf protection. For example, in March 2019, the National Academy of Sciences, in a congressionally mandated report, confirmed that red wolves are a taxonomically distinct species worthy of legal protection. Furthermore, in November 2018, a federal court held that the FWS was improperly allowing the species to decline despite having access to conservation strategies that could maintain the wild population.⁴ Considering these developments and the now perilously low population numbers, it is critical that the FWS act expeditiously to increase the existing wild red wolf population.

In 2019, Governor Roy Cooper committed the State of North Carolina to working with federal, state, and local entities on the survival and recovery of the endangered red wolf. North Carolina is host to the only wild red wolf population in the world, as well as the world's second largest red wolf captive breeding program. With the state's executive branch in support of recovery, it is difficult to comprehend why the FWS would delay necessary action in the face of another extinction event.

Given the urgent situation, immediate action by the FWS is necessary to ensure a sustainable wild red wolf population in North Carolina and beyond. Specifically, we urge the FWS to take the following steps as soon as possible:

- Introduce new breeding pairs into the wild expeditiously.
- As soon as reproduction in the wild is reestablished, resume release of captive pups into wild dens. Pup fostering has proven to be a useful tool in red wolf recovery efforts. In addition to increasing the wild population's numbers, these efforts also enhance the population's genetic diversity, which is crucial for the species' long-term viability.
- Restart the coyote sterilization program and other strategies outlined in the Red Wolf Adaptive Management Program.
- Maintain the current five-county recovery area, and work with state and local agencies to identify additional lands that could function as habitats for red wolves. Maintaining a large landscape is essential for the long-term recovery of the red wolf.
- Select additional, new sites for red wolf reintroductions to help expand and reestablish the current range of the red wolf.
- Protect wild red wolves from gunshot mortalities through sincere and expanded engagement with local communities, including education programs, local partnerships, and improving relationships with landowners. A comprehensive and participatory approach to community outreach is essential to the success of red wolf recovery.
- Support targeted education efforts that assist in the understanding and recognition of the American red wolf and its natural history. It is critical to provide the tools and information needed for residents to distinguish red wolves from coyotes, assuage concerns about the perceived threats red wolves pose to people and livestock, and convey the positive impact a sustainable American red wolf population could have on the local environment and tourism economy.

We urge you to commit to the preservation and protection of our nation's imperiled species by taking the actions necessary to ensure a prosperous future for the American red wolf. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service must renew its commitment to the recovery of America's red wolf by resuming releases of captive red wolves into the wild immediately.

Sincerely,



A. Donald McEachin
Member of Congress



Raúl Grijalva
Member of Congress



Donald S. Beyer Jr.
Member of Congress

⁴ See *Red Wolf Coal. v. U.S. Fish & Wildlife Serv.*, 346 F. Supp. 3d 802 (E.D.N.C. 2018).

/s/
Alma S. Adams, Ph.D.
Member of Congress

/s/
David E. Price
Member of Congress

/s/
G. K. Butterfield
Member of Congress

/s/
Alan Lowenthal
Member of Congress

/s/
Alcee L. Hastings
Member of Congress

/s/
David N. Cicilline
Member of Congress

/s/
Deb Haaland
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Diana DeGette
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Haley Stevens
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Peter DeFazio
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Ro Khanna
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Robert C. "Bobby" Scott
Member of Congress

/s/

Steve Cohen
Member of Congress

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Wm. Lacy Clay
Member of Congress