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Contacts:

Southern Environmental Law Center, Kathleen Sullivan, 919-945-7106 or ksullivan@selcnc.org

Representing:

Red Wolf Coalition, Kim Wheeler, 252-796-5600 or kwheeler@redwolves.com

Defenders of Wildlife, Jake Bleich, 202-772-3208 or jbleich@defenders.org

Animal Welfare Institute, Marjorie Fishman, 202-446-2128 or margie@awionline.org

Conservation Groups Sue USFWS to Save Wild Red Wolves

Agency Continues to Violate Law, Court Ruling as Wild Red Wolves Face Extinction

CHAPEL HILL, N.C.—On behalf of Red Wolf Coalition, Defenders of Wildlife, and Animal Welfare Institute, the Southern Environmental Law Center today sued the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of North Carolina for violations of the Endangered Species Act caused by new, illegal agency policies that bar the use of proven management measures to save wild red wolves.

“The Fish and Wildlife Service is managing this species for extinction,” said Sierra Weaver, senior attorney at the Southern Environmental Law Center which represents the conservation organizations in court. “Faced with a wild population of only seven known animals, the Fish and Wildlife Service is now claiming—without basis—that it’s not allowed to take proven, necessary measures to save the wild red wolves. The service urgently needs to restart red wolf releases from captivity, which it did regularly for 27 years. Otherwise we’re going to lose the world’s only wild population of this wolf.”

“Under the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s mismanagement, the world’s most endangered wolf has only moved closer to extinction,” said Jason Rylander, senior endangered species counsel at Defenders of Wildlife. “We have given the service every opportunity to reverse course and supplement the last wild population of red wolves with captive releases. Sadly, with only seven collared wolves left in the wild, it’s apparent we can’t wait any longer.”

Two years ago, in November 2018, a federal court found that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had violated the Endangered Species Act by suspending proven conservation measures for wild red wolves after the Southern Environmental Law Center went to court on behalf of the same conservation organizations.

Rather than resolving those violations, the agency has doubled down on its abandonment of those measures and invented a new, illegal policy that it claims does not permit it to release red wolves from the captive population into the wild. The agency also now claims that its rules do not allow the agency to address hybridization with coyotes. As a result, the world’s only population of wild red wolves is now on the brink of extinction.

No red wolf pups were born in the wild in 2019 or 2020 for the first time since 1988. Meanwhile, the captive red wolf population continues to increase with more new pups being born every spring, even as the agency refuses to reinstate red wolf releases.

"We hope the USFWS will look closely at its red wolf conservation policies and enact the necessary changes that will make the survival of wild red wolves a priority." Kim Wheeler, Executive Director, RWC

Following successful conservation efforts and reintroductions from captive populations, America's red wolves rebounded from extinction in the wild to number about 100 animals in the early 2000s. That population level persisted for approximately a decade in eastern North Carolina. Since 2018, however, the wild red wolf population has plummeted by 70 percent.

"The ESA requires USFWS to carry out programs for the conservation of the red wolf and to ensure that its actions do not jeopardize the species' continued existence," said Johanna Hamburger, director and senior staff attorney for the Animal Welfare Institute's terrestrial wildlife program. "The agency is failing on both counts. The current lack of action, by USFWS' own admission, will cause the extinction of the wild red wolf population unless the agency immediately restarts conservation efforts."

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About the Red Wolf Coalition

The Red Wolf Coalition (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 (www.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. Follow us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) for updates and other important animal protection news.

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.

About 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 80 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