

## Press Statement from the Southern Environmental Law Center

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## **Release of Highly Endangered Red Wolves into Wild Gives Hope to Renewed Conservation**

*Court action leads to USFWS release of rare wolves*

CHAPEL HILL, N.C.— Following a successful legal battle, conservation groups hope the recent release of nine highly endangered red wolves into the wild is the first of many steps by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service needed to save the world’s rarest canids that now number as few as 15 known animals in the wild. Last year, a federal court ordered the agency—in a lawsuit brought by the conservation groups—to prepare and implement a plan to restart its previously successful reintroductions of red wolves into the only wild population in the world.

“We are thrilled to see these wolves running free out in the wild, and our goal is to see this American wolf running with wild-born pups very soon.” said Sierra Weaver, senior attorney at the Southern Environmental Law Center. “And as exciting as these releases are, the crucial question remains: will the Fish and Wildlife Service recommit to the success of the wild North Carolina population with ongoing, consistent releases and active management going forward?”

In 2015, the USFWS suspended its longstanding and successful practice of releasing captive red wolves into the wild within the approximately 1.7 million-acre Red Wolf Recovery Area in eastern North Carolina. Six years later, as few as seven red wolves remained in the wild. By contrast, during the first five years of its red wolf reintroduction program, the USFWS released an average of eight wolves per year, totaling 134 red wolves over the program’s 35-year history. Proven conservation measures, such as captive red wolf releases and coyote sterilizations, helped the wild red wolf population grow to nearly 130 animals in the late 2000s, and it was estimated at 100 or more wolves from 2002 to 2014.

“Each release helps ensure red wolves have a future in the wild,” said Ben Prater, Southeast program director at Defenders of Wildlife. “However, more must be done to bring this species back from the brink of extinction. More releases, pup fostering, and coexistence work are all necessary for the red wolf’s recovery.”

The Southern Environmental Law Center [sued](#) the USFWS in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of North Carolina on November 16, 2020, on behalf of the Red Wolf Coalition, Defenders of Wildlife, and the Animal Welfare Institute for violations of the Endangered Species Act caused by illegal agency policies that bar the use of proven management measures to save wild red wolves. The groups filed a [motion for preliminary injunction](#) in the case on November

19, 2020, seeking to temporarily prohibit the agency from implementing its recent policy change barring the release of captive wolves into the wild. That motion was granted on January 22, 2021, when the court ordered the USFWS to develop a plan for the release of captive red wolves into the wild during the pending litigation. This release of captive wolves into the wild population is pursuant to that plan.

“These releases, which nearly double the number of red wolves in the wild, represent an important step on the road to saving the world’s most endangered wolves,” said Johanna Hamburger, director and senior staff attorney for AWI’s terrestrial wildlife program. “We are also encouraged by the USFWS’s new efforts to reduce human-caused mortality, such as increasing driver awareness to reduce vehicle collisions, which must be addressed to allow these animals to flourish in their new home.”

“The introduction of red wolves from captivity into the wild is not an easy task. We appreciate the hard work being done by the USFWS Red Wolf Recovery Program’s field staff to see that captive wolves have every opportunity for survival in the wild. We have our paws crossed that releases will lead to wild born litters of red wolf pups,” said Kim Wheeler, executive director of Red Wolf Coalition.

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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](http://www.awionline.org) ([www.awionline.org](http://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 nearly 2.2 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 Southern Environmental Law Center**

The Southern Environmental Law Center is one of the nation’s most powerful defenders of the environment, rooted in the South. With a long track record, SELC takes on the toughest environmental challenges in court, in government, and in our communities to protect our region’s air, water, climate, wildlife, lands, and people. Nonprofit and nonpartisan, the organization has a staff of 170, including 90 attorneys, and is headquartered in Charlottesville, Va., with offices in Asheville, Atlanta, Birmingham, Chapel Hill, Charleston, Nashville, Richmond, and Washington, D.C. [southernenvironment.org](http://southernenvironment.org)