



**North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources  
Office of the Secretary**

Governor Roy Cooper

Secretary D. Reid Wilson

February 19, 2021

The Honorable Scott de la Vega  
Acting Secretary  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Acting Secretary de la Vega,

The American Red Wolf is the most endangered canid species in the world, and North Carolina is the only place in the world where red wolves exist in the wild in their natural habitat. Unfortunately, the future of red wolves is in doubt. As few as ten wolves remain in the wild today, down from 130 fifteen years ago, and no pups have been born in the wild for two years. This precipitous decline of the only wild population of this species is unacceptable.

Red wolves meet the Endangered Species Act (ESA) criteria for a distinct population of a species. Therefore, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has an obligation to take immediate steps to begin rebuilding the population of red wolves in the wild. Furthermore, on January 21, 2021, U.S. District Judge Terrence Boyle signed an order directing USFWS to draft a plan by March 1, 2021, for releasing red wolves from zoos and other facilities into the recovery area centered around Alligator National Wildlife Preserve in northeastern North Carolina. The North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources (DNCR) strongly encourages USFWS to implement this order as expeditiously as possible to rebuild and sustain a viable wild red wolf population. The North Carolina Zoo, a DNCR Division, manages a population of red wolves on its premises, and leads the national Species Survival Plan for red wolves, through the Association of Zoos and Aquariums.

The USFWS's Red Wolf Recovery Program was a global model for successful reintroductions until it was dramatically scaled back in 2015. As part of that program, the release of captive wolves into the wild was instrumental in establishing and expanding the existing wild population of wolves. While a number of factors has contributed to the current small size of the population, the cessation of releases was fundamental to the precipitous decline of wild red wolves.

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DNCR fully supports the resumption of red wolf releases into the recovery area to ensure the survival of the existing population and the full recovery of the species. The release of multiple pairs of wolves will be required over the next year to jumpstart the effort. The current wild population has become too small to allow for any meaningful or sustainable population growth. The reintroduction strategy with the greatest immediate chance of success is to release established breeding pairs of younger wolves as it would most rapidly boost the population size and would not rely on released wolves finding wild mates. Once breeding pairs are established in the release area and begin producing offspring, additional release of animals via pup fostering should be conducted. Pup fostering has been demonstrated to be the most effective means of releasing wolves, but it is reliant on wild wolves producing litters.

While the resumption of red wolf releases is essential for the success of the recovery program, other actions must also be taken to ensure the released wolves survive. An expanded and more participatory approach to community outreach is essential to the success of any recovery initiative. Private landowners' needs and concerns must be addressed. Additional and significant outreach to the hunting community and the general public in the release area is required. Furthermore, the coyote placeholder/sterilization program, as recommended in the Red Wolf Adaptive Management Plan, must resume to ensure released wolves do not mate with or face excessive competition from coyotes.

The people of North Carolina strongly support the restoration of this the wild red wolf population, and the State of North Carolina has made significant efforts to ensure that this species survives. DNCR urges USFWS to renew its commitment to American red wolf recovery, and stands ready to contribute our expertise and resources to assist USFWS in drafting and implementing a release plan that has the greatest chance of success in preventing extinction of this species.

Thank you for your consideration. Please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours truly,



D. Reid Wilson, Secretary  
N.C. Department of Natural and Cultural Resources

cc: Martha Williams, Principal Deputy Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Leopoldo Miranda, Regional Director, Southeast U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Peter Benjamin, Field Supervisor, Raleigh Field Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
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