

TESTIMONY OF GORDON MYERS
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
NORTH CAROLINA WILDLIFE RESOURCES COMMISSION

BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS ON THE STATUS OF
THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S MANAGEMENT OF WOLVES.

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INTRODUCTION

Chairman Gohmert, ranking member Dingell, and members of the subcommittee, I am Gordon Myers, executive director of the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (Commission), a state agency whose mission is to conserve North Carolina's wildlife resources and their habitats and provide programs and opportunities that allow hunters, anglers, boaters and other outdoor enthusiasts to enjoy wildlife-associated recreation. I am grateful for the opportunity to come before you to provide testimony regarding red wolf management in the State of North Carolina.

BACKGROUND

During the Fall 1973, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) established a recovery program for the red wolf (*Canis rufus*) based on belief that a pure population of red wolves still existed in southeast Texas and adjacent areas of Louisiana. Field work revealed extensive hybridization with coyotes across the limited remaining red wolf range. Hybridization with coyotes threatened the continued existence of the species. Therefore, all recovery efforts were redirected from protecting animals in the wild to a planned extirpation of the species from the wild. This extreme decision to extirpate red wolves from the wild highlighted the immediate and significant threat of inter-specific breeding with coyotes. The removal of the species from the wild was accompanied by a long-range objective to eventually return the species to areas of its historic range

Between the fall of 1973 and July 1980, the Service captured and examined more than 400 wild canids from which only 14 animals became the founding stock for the Red Wolf Species Survival Captive Breeding Program (SSP). Red wolves were declared extinct in the wild in 1980. Today, 12 founder lines are represented in the wild and captive populations. As of January 1, 2015 the SSP included 207 wolves and 44 institutions.

After the species was believed to be safeguarded in captivity, the Service conducted small-scale reintroduction experiments in 1976 and 1978. The Service released mated pairs of red wolves onto Bulls Island, a 4,909-acre component of the Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge near Charleston, South Carolina. The results of these releases indicated potential feasibility of establishing adult wild-caught red wolves in selected habitats in the wild.

SETTING UP THE EXPERIMENT IN NORTH CAROLINA

In 1986 the Service promulgated rules that would use wolves sourced from the SSP captive breeding program to establish a reintroduction experiment at Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge (ARNWR) located in Dare and Tyrrell Counties, North Carolina. ARNWR was selected as an experimental reintroduction site for the following key reasons:

1. abundance of federal lands with habitat and prey base characteristics presumed to be suitable for red wolves
2. relatively low human population
3. absence of coyotes on the landscape

The final special rule published in the Federal Register on November 19, 1986 provided guidelines and sideboards for the experimental reintroduction. Those rules designated the red wolf reintroduction as a nonessential experimental population (NEP) in accordance with section 10 (j) of the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Under the ESA, the Secretary of the Department of Interior is required to determine whether or not the population is essential to the continued existence of the species. In the case of red wolf, it was determined that despite extirpation from the wild, the red wolf was secure in the SSP captive breeding program. Notably, in response to public comments expressing concern about potential adverse impacts resulting from removing animals from the SSP captive breeding program and introducing them into ARNWR, the Service responded in the final rules that they would limit their release of wolves to no more than 12 animals. Further, the Service stated the refuge and adjacent U.S. Air Force lands could eventually sustain a red wolf population of 25 to 35 animals. In 1995, the Service amended its special rule to include additional federal lands. The Service stated the reintroduction area probably could not support 30 wolves for an extended period of time; however, the addition of Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge (PLNWR) would add approximately 112,000 acres to the reintroduction area. The Service estimated the additional refuge lands could support 15 to 25 wolves. Thus, based on the 1995 rule, the Service estimated a total carrying capacity of 55 wolves on federal lands.

The Red Wolf Recovery Plan institutes the clear goal that the nonessential experimental population of red wolves introduced into northeastern North Carolina (NENC) should be managed on “federal lands”. Further, the recovery plan explicitly states the objective that the population be “self-sustaining”. The Service’s 1986, 1991, and 1995 special rules for the red wolf NEP incorporate this goal and objective.

CONDUCTING THE EXPERIMENT IN NORTH CAROLINA

According to Service records 165 wolves were released into the NENC population between 1986 and 2014, 130 of which came from the SSP captive breeding program, far exceeding the 12 wolves noted in the 1986 final rules. Further, of those releases, 64 occurred on private lands – an action that is not authorized in the Service’s rules nor is it congruent with the goal of managing wolves on federal lands.

In the 29-year period since the reintroduction of red wolves into NENC, active management of habitat for red wolves has been minimal. Consequently, wolves have persisted predominantly on private lands. As evidenced by research, red wolves are more likely to utilize agricultural fields than all other habitat types combined. Early successional fields comprise the second most likely utilized habitat type. Both of these habitat types are primarily found on privately-owned lands within the reintroduction area. This well documented persistence on private land is not in harmony with achieving the explicit goal set forth in the Red Wolf Recovery Plan that the red wolf population in NENC should be managed on “federal lands”.

Because the population of red wolves reintroduced to NENC was determined to be a nonessential experimental population in accordance with Section 10(j) of the ESA, the final special rules included circumstances under which take of the species was authorized. Those take provisions were promulgated in accordance with Section 4(d) of the ESA.

Under the special rules that apply to the NENC NEP red wolf population, the Service stated “programs to purposely reintroduce predators, such as the red wolf, must be accompanied by provisions to protect private property from the presence of such reintroduced animals if the landowner does not want them on his property.” Accordingly, those rules incorporate the requirement that the Service remove unwanted wolves from private land upon request of the landowner. The Commission has worked closely with the Service to try to fulfill this requirement; however, most efforts have proven to be ineffective, largely due to the tremendous challenges associated with recapturing animals and the propensity for animals to return to the vicinity of their capture subsequent being released again on federal lands.

The special rules also allow direct and incidental take of red wolves by landowners under certain circumstances, including incidental take pursuant to lawful harvest of coyotes. Despite those explicit provisions, the Commission was sued in federal court for adopting state regulations that allowed coyote hunting at night statewide. Ironically, a court ordered injunction provided greater federal protection to non-native coyotes than to the red wolf. Ultimately, the State entered into a settlement agreement that restored coyote hunting during daylight hours, but maintained a prohibition against hunting coyotes at night within the five-county reintroduction area.

LESSONS LEARNED

The NENC NEP is one of two attempts to reintroduce red wolves in to the wild. The other experiment in Great Smoky Mountains National Park located in the North Carolina – Tennessee mountains failed, in part, due to lack of access to key land areas, including private lands. The Service terminated the experiment in 1998 based on low pup survival and the inability of the wolves to persist on federal lands.

The NENC experiment and associated regulations were not designed to achieve a recovery scale population. Instead, the experiment provided an opportunity to test goals incorporated into the Red Wolf Recovery Plan. Specifically, the federal lands in NENC

provided a crucial living laboratory to test if red wolves could achieve wild reproduction, become self-sustaining, and persist on federal lands.

Perhaps one of the greatest accomplishments of the NENC NEP was to prove that captive red wolves could be introduced into and reproduce in the wild. Prior to the proliferation of coyotes on the landscape, there were some indications that the red wolf may become self-sustaining over time; however, coyote interactions drastically decreased if not eliminated this feasibility.

With the continued expansion of coyote ranges in the continental U.S., including eastern NC, the threat of genetic introgression of coyotes into the NENC red wolf population increased throughout the 1990's and the first known hybridization event occurred in 1993. In 1999, similar to the 1970's, the Service declared hybridization with coyotes the greatest threat to red wolf recovery. North Carolina hunting and trapping records provide state-level indices of harvest. In the 10-year period from 2002 to 2012, reported numbers of coyotes trapped statewide increased from 133 to 3458, an increase of 2600%. In the five counties comprising the red wolf reintroduction area, reported harvest increased from 0 to 138 coyotes between 2004 and 2012. For the foreseeable future, it appears the hypothesis that red wolves can become self-sustaining, particularly within landscapes that include coyotes, has been disproven.

There is an abundance of data that clearly indicates red wolves cannot be managed to stay on federal lands. Furthermore, significant resources are necessary to attempt to meet such expectations and to date, no management scheme has proven effective to meet the expectations of private landowners. Today, nearly 30 years after the first reintroductions in Dare, there is one known wolf pack occupying federal lands, despite releases of 58 wolves into Dare County. It is clear that any success future reintroductions must be accompanied by participation and support of private landowners. Realistic expectations, predictability, responsiveness, and accountability are essential to sustaining support.

CURRENT STATUS

On September 12, 2016, the Service announced recommended decisions in response to an ongoing evaluation of the Red Wolf Recovery Program. The Service's decision memo acknowledges growing concerns from private landowners regarding management of the Service's NENC project and the collaborative commitment between the Service and the Commission to develop a canid management strategy. The memo further outlines the actions taken by the Service in the past three years to evaluate the program.

The decision memo describes decision options and recommendations for the overall Red Wolf Recovery Program and the NENC NEP. The memo includes important information regarding the current status of the SSP captive breeding population and the NENC NEP. This information from a report released June 10, 2016 by the Red Wolf Population Viability Analysis (PVA) workgroup is the most up-to-date information currently available.

With regard to the NENC NEP, the Service recommends reducing the focus of the NENC NEP to federal lands within Dare County, removing isolated wolf packs from lands to which the Service lacks access, incorporating those animals into the SSP captive breeding program, and to better manage the remaining animals to the federal lands in Dare County.

The June 10, 2016 PVA workgroup report indicates that under conditions modeled in the baseline scenario, the SSP captive breeding population has a moderate chance (65.7%) of maintaining the genetic diversity for at least 150 years as set forth in the Red Wolf Recovery Plan. Further, under conditions modeled for the NENC NEP in the baseline scenario, the population is projected to crash in as few as 8 years. The PVA workgroup modeled a range of permutations to examine options that would improve chances for success. Of the model simulations, the permutations that reflected an increase to 400 animals in the SSP captive population indicate the best chances for successfully maintaining red wolf genetics as set forth in the red wolf recovery plan. In fact, the scenario under which the SSP captive breeding program capacity is increased to 400 animals and all NENC NEP wolves are brought into program yielded a 91.2% chance of maintaining the genetic diversity for at least 150 years as set forth in the Red Wolf Recovery Plan. There were several other model scenarios that yielded a greater than 90% chance of success, but each scenario was based on the operational premise that captive breeding success could be increased more than 30% from 19% to 25%.

The Service's decision memorandum states the species is not secured in captivity and the SSP captive breeding population must increase to approximately 400 animals with a minimum of 52 breeding pairs. It further states this is the number one management priority for the red wolf recovery program and that if the situation is not managed immediately, the entire species would be in peril. It is notable that the fundamental basis of establishing the NENC NEP was the red wolf was secure in captivity.

The Service's recommendation to maintain a small population of intensively managed wild wolves as part of an SSP captive breeding program meta-population is incongruent with this priority. Intensive management required to address the perpetual risks of hybridization with coyotes and to recapture wolves that leave federal lands will encumber critical financial and human resources that should be used to expand capacity within the SSP captive breeding program. Recall that hybridization with coyotes was the impetus for forced extirpation of red wolves from the wild three decades ago. Further, the recent PVA report indicates the NENC NEP has a 2.38 times higher risk of mortality than the SSP captive population.

The Commission believes there currently exists a clear and present danger of species extinction and the best decision for safeguarding the red wolf is to capture the remaining wolves in the NENC, safely secure them in the SSP captive breeding program, and redirect resources towards increasing the capacity of the SSP facilities.