

Red Wolf in Northeastern North Carolina

ISSUE: What are the status and significant issues regarding the red wolf reintroduction into northeastern North Carolina?

Response/FWS Position:

- Red wolves were declared extinct in the wild in 1980, and were reintroduced to northeastern North Carolina (NENC) in 1987. Currently, approximately 75 red wolves inhabit a patchwork of approximately 1 million acres of federal, state and private land in 5 NENC counties. It is considered a landmark program in species conservation that laid the groundwork for other Endangered predator reintroduction programs, and is the first successful reintroduction of a species declared extinct in the wild.
- On December 21, 1998, the U.S. District Court for the eastern district of North Carolina denied the Plaintiffs' Motion for Summary Judgement in a lawsuit seeking to invalidate the federal regulations regarding red wolves on private lands. A North Carolina state law passed in 1994 that allowed landowners to trap and kill red wolves was nullified by this ruling.
- A meeting of Service and Solicitor Office personnel regarding the current red wolf regulations concluded with a consensus that interpretation of the current regulations provides the flexibility to deny requests for removing wolves from private lands in the absence of a problem. This interpretation of the regulations is also in tune with traditional wildlife management concepts and laws. Wildlife are not the property of landowners but belong to the public and are managed by Federal and State governments for the public good. Such concepts and laws do not provide for taking or removal of wildlife from private lands in the absence of a problem.
- The Service, under the authorities of Endangered Species Act, is committed to recovering the red wolf in a biologically sound, publicly acceptable, and fiscally responsible, manner. The reintroduction efforts in northeastern North Carolina have demonstrated that recovery is possible with little or no significant impacts to local residents. All involved programs within the Service were party to the decision made on interpretation and implementation of the current regulations. We will consider revision of the regulations in conjunction with regulations to be promulgated for the next reintroduction site within two years. Although most local residents have little or no contact with red wolves and/or have learned to live with them, a few private landowners may disagree with our interpretation of the regulations and threaten or implement measures to legally or politically challenge the Service.

Background Information:

- Continuous requests from two to three private landowners to remove red wolves from their property have created a workload burden for project staff. Additional private landowners may also make such requests in the future. As more than 50% of the lands inhabited by wolves is privately owned, such requests could be substantial. Removal of wolves not causing a problem may also be detrimental to conservation and recovery of the species. This situation led to a recent (January 21, 1999) meeting regarding interpretation and implementation of our regulations. Until now, we have attempted to honor all requests to remove wolves from private lands, whether a problem existed or not. Our practice of trying to honor all requests for wolf removal has been a major drain on project staff. It is now clear that with a population of wolves estimated at 75 or more, and given their tendency to travel long distances, their territoriality, the mixture of land ownerships, and the cost in manpower and funds that would be better used to promote recovery, it is not possible to recapture, remove, and keep wolves off of a specific tract of land. In addition, removal of wolves in the absence of a problem may be detrimental to the conservation of the species by preventing natural expansion and recovery of the species, and by contributing to the establishment of coyotes. This may result in interbreeding between the two species. Interbreeding with coyotes was the final factor that led to endangerment and near extinction of the species.
- In cooperation with the Regional Solicitor's Office, we have developed written guidelines for implementing the regulations. These guidelines address the removal of wolves that (1) are causing a problem and (2) are not causing a problem. A problem is defined in the guidelines and justification spelled out for the guidelines applied in each category. Requests to remove wolves will be evaluated on an case by case basis and a decision on removal made based on established criteria.

Contact: Gerry A. Jackson, Assistant Director, Ecological Services (202/208-4646)

Date: February 23, 1999