

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Red Wolf Education and Health Care Facility Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge Tyrrell County, North Carolina

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), in cooperation with the Red Wolf Coalition (Coalition) proposes to build a Red Wolf Education and Health Care Facility on Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, in Tyrrell County, North Carolina. The Red Wolf Education and Health Care Facility will consist of a 1,200 square foot main building that includes adjoining outdoor enclosures. Parking and restroom facilities would be associated with the Facility. The Service's Red Wolf Recovery Program and Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge staff and facilities will support the facility by providing veterinary care services for the wolves, purchasing veterinary and animal care supplies, funding utilities and other operational costs, and other means of support. The Coalition would provide knowledgeable staff for educational and outreach events and informational materials in support of education and outreach activities.

The Service has analyzed three alternatives to the proposal, including the following:

- Alternative 1 (No Action) – see section 2.1 of the Environmental Assessment (EA);
- Alternative 2 (Red Wolf Education and Health Care Facility (East; the Preferred Alternative) – see section 2.2 of the EA; and,
- Alternative 3 (Red Wolf Education and Health Care Facility (West) – see section 2.3 of the EA.

The proposal was selected over the other alternatives because:

- The preferred alternative would construct a centrally located education center and basic veterinary health care facility for red wolves on Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge property on the east side of Highway 94, approximately 1.3 miles south of Columbia, in Tyrrell County, North Carolina.
- The preferred alternative would host invited public educational and conservation interactions, as well as an opportunity for visitors to view red wolves held at the Facility. The preferred alternative would also provide a veterinary care facility for wolves that maintains proper ventilation, sanitation, and storage to satisfy the Service's regulations on the management of such facilities.
- The preferred alternative satisfies the evaluation criteria established by the Internal Scoping Team and would be unencumbered by other refuge activities or facilities.
- The preferred alternative would have minimal (or non-existent) physical or biological impacts on plant communities, wetlands, fish and shellfish habitat, essential fish habitat, and threatened and endangered species, and cultural, recreational, economic or social resources.

Implementation of the agency's decision would be expected to result in the following environmental, social, and economic effects:

- The preferred alternative project area does not contain jurisdictional wetlands, and does not support any fish or shellfish habitat or essential fish habitat; therefore, none would be affected. See section 4.2.2 and Appendix C of the EA.
- The red wolf is known to occur in the vicinity of the project site; however, the preferred alternative is not likely to adversely affect this species. Any potential adverse impacts to foraging or other habitats due to construction and operation of the facility are not expected, or would be so small as to be insignificant in their effects. Captive wolves would be separated from the wild wolves and all other wildlife via a pen fence and a perimeter fence. Negative effects from any potential interactions are not expected. No other threatened or endangered species are known to occur on the project site, thus none would be affected. See section 4.2.2 and Appendix D of the EA.
- The preferred alternative project site is easily accessible from the Town of Columbia and other local tourist attractions, and is in close proximity to Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. The preferred alternative will maintain wolves in captivity in proximity to residential areas and other refuge facilities, but their handling and care will be given special consideration in terms of security and husbandry methodologies, and will be secure from the general public. See sections 3.2.4.2 and 4.2.4.2 of the EA.
- The Town of Columbia has recently been selected as a Small Town Economic Prosperity (STEP) community (www.ncruralcenter.org/STEP) by the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center. The construction of the preferred alternative near the Town will likely contribute to the community's economic status. See sections 3.2.4.1 and 4.2.4.1 of the EA.

Measures to mitigate and/or minimize adverse impacts have been incorporated into the proposal. These measures include:

- The preferred alternative project was designed to minimize any adverse impacts to the site (e.g., most trees were left in place to provide shade and shelter for wolves maintained at the Facility).

The proposal is not expected to have any significant adverse effects on wetlands and floodplains, pursuant to Executive Order 11990 and 11988 because:

- The preferred alternative project area does not contain jurisdictional wetlands; therefore, none would be affected. See section 4.2.2 and Appendix C of the EA.

The proposal is not expected to have any significant effects on the human environment because:

- The preferred alternative would not affect any sites on the National Register of Historic Places, and there are no archaeological sites or National Register-listed properties in the project area. See sections 3.2.3.1 and 4.2.3.1 of the EA.
- The preferred alternative is a small area on Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge and is not appropriate for hunting or other refuge activities. See sections 3.2.3.2 and 4.2.3.2 of the EA.
- The preferred alternative will house wolves secured within an enclosure and a perimeter fence, and a Red Wolf Escape Contingency Plan has been developed and would be in effect for the facility. See section 4.2.4.2 and Appendix H of the EA.

- The preferred alternative facilities and wolf husbandry techniques for the Veterinary Center will meet or exceed standards set by the Service and the Red Wolf Husbandry Manual. See section 4.2.4.2 and Appendix F of the EA.

The proposed action is compatible with the Service's mission "to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people." The proposed action will also fulfill one of the goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System and the Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge to protect "those species which are classified as endangered, threatened, or of special concern."

The proposal has been thoroughly coordinated with all interested and/or affected parties. Parties contacted include:

- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Regulatory Division, Washington Field Office;
- North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission;
- North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation;
- Tyrrell County Board of Commissioners;
- Greater Tyrrell County Chamber of Commerce;
- Tyrrell County Health Department;
- Greater Tyrrell County Ecotourism Committee;
- Columbia Town Council;
- Partnership for the Sounds;
- Red Wolf Coalition;
- Several local landowners and businesses; and,
- The EA was available for public review from October 8, 2006 to October 24, 2006. The notice of availability of the EA was published in several formats, including local newspapers and public libraries, and was available for review on the Service's website and at the local libraries.

Therefore, it is my determination that the proposal does not constitute a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment under the meaning of section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (as amended). As such, an environmental impact statement is not required. An EA has been prepared in support of this finding and is available upon request to Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge.

References:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2006. Environmental Assessment for the Red Wolf Education and Health Care Facility, Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ecological Services Field Office, Raleigh, NC.

 Regional Director

2/2/07
 Date