

**NWX-DOI-FISH & WILDLIFE**

**Moderator: USFWS External Affairs  
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1:00 pm CT**

Coordinator: At this time all participants are on a listen only mode. During the question and answer session please press star 1 on your touchtone phone. Today's conference is being recorded. If you have any objections you may disconnect at this time. I would now like to turn the call over to Jeff Fleming. Sir you may begin.

Jeff Fleming: Thank you (Stacy) very much. First of all, I want to say good afternoon and welcome everyone to this Media Briefing that the Fish and Wildlife Service is hosting for a significant conservation announcement about our work in North Carolina.

My name is Jeff Fleming. I'm the Assistant Regional Director for External Affairs here in the Service's Southeast Region based in Atlanta. We're glad you are with us and grateful that you're able to participate on short notice.

Today we have the Service's Southeast Regional Director Cindy Dohner with us; that's C-I-N-D-Y, Dohner is D-O-H-N-E-R with us. And she will provide

remarks outlining some important decisions and actions that the Service will be taking moving forward.

In addition we have Leopoldo Miranda and his name is spelt L-E-O-P-O-L-D-O, Miranda is M-I-R-A-N-D-A. And he is our Assistant Regional Director for Ecological Services here in the Southeast Region.

Background materials should be available on our web site either at [fws.gov/southeast](http://fws.gov/southeast) or moving forward into the week [fws.gov/redwolf/evaluation/](http://fws.gov/redwolf/evaluation/).

When Cindy concludes her remarks we will take questions. And our Operator will queue reporters up appropriately.

We would like to hold follow-ups to one just until we get through everybody who has a question. The other thing I wanted to note is we have Pete Benjamin available as well when we get to our question and answer session. And he is our Field Supervisor in our Raleigh, North Carolina Ecological Services Field Office and was the leader of a Recovery Team we put in place last year whose work precipitates what we're going to be talking about today.

Cindy.

Cindy Dohner: Thanks Jeff. Thanks everybody and good afternoon. We're glad you were able to join us. I appreciate your interest in the Fish and Wildlife Services Red Wolf Recovery Program and the nonessential experimental population in Eastern North Carolina.

We began the evaluation of the Recovery Program and its nonessential experimental population nearly three years ago. After an intensive Peer-Reviewed Program Evaluation conducted by Wildlife Management Institute we said plainly that we made some mistakes in the management of the experimental population. And that we would launch a comprehensive review of the entire Recovery Program for the red wolves.

As part of that review we announced in June, 2015 we would embark on a number of parallel actions to assess the feasibility of recovery of the red wolf in the wild and at the same time we would manage the experimental population completely within the rules we put in place in 1995.

This brings us to the decision today. The science we now have in hand is much better and gives us a stronger understanding of the best information currently available.

Some things we knew have been affirmed. Some assumptions we operated under had been turned upside down. And all of it taken together is helping us chart a clear path forward for red wolf recovery in the wild.

I want to share with you the results of the work over the past 15 months and the steps we will be taking as a result of the work accomplished that updates 30 years of understanding and science.

First, we are committed to red wolf recovery. I am committed to red wolf recovery. We said that from the beginning. The steps we are outlining today represents the best opportunity for positive progress. Recognizing that science changes and continues to evolve, there's a lack of consensus in some areas,

there are budget constraints. And the plain reality that we must work to do a better job with relationships and understanding each other's perspectives.

I am calling for all of us to pull together better to help recover this species. If we don't, we could each be burdened with outcomes we may regret. We need to get beyond the mistakes and choices of the past and commit to working together.

This is a call to action. We did it for the Puerto Rican parrot and the Florida manatee. We can do it for the red wolf and hopefully recover this species.

I want to outline the beginning of a better path for the red wolf. So here are our next steps.

First, the Service will move quickly to secure the captive population of red wolves which we now know is not sustainable in its current configuration.

Second, the Service needs to determine if and where potential new sites exists for additional experimental wild populations. We'll do that by October, 2017. We will ensure these determinations comply with all environmental rules and include public engagement.

Third, the Service will propose to revise the existing experimental population rule to apply only to Dare County Bombing Range and Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge where stable packs exist on federal lands. This proposed action will change the scope of and goals for that experimental population and is expected to be completed by December, 2017. These

proposed changes will also go through appropriate environmental review and public comment.

Finally by October, 2017 the Service working with others will complete a comprehensive Specie Status Assessment and Five Year Status Review for the red wolf building on the foundational work accomplished over the past years and past history. This will guide the Service's recovery planning in the future.

Now I want to talk with you about why we believe this is the best course of action if we are ever to achieve the kind of successes that we have seen for other species. Again the decisions I am talking about here today reflect the latest and best science we have in hand for the red wolf.

The Recovery Team we established last fall brought together diverse expertise and perspectives. First, I want to thank them for their efforts and the benefit of their experience, talent and perspectives. The team led by Pete Benjamin put together a detailed report outlining a number of options.

The debate that unfolded demonstrated how difficult our work ahead is likely to be and why the steps I outlined are so key. The most stunning data shows the captive population is not secure. We believed it was but it is not.

In fact if we continue with the status quo we will likely lose the captive population. Under current conditions with only 29 breeding periods in captivity the population is unable to sustain itself. That is unacceptable.

We believe as the Recovery Team suggested that this should be a priority for the Service and its partners. To secure the captive population we must

essentially double it to at least 400 wolves. Currently there are slightly more than 200 in captivity.

We must nearly double the number of healthy breeding pairs to a minimum of 52. And that is simply to sustain the captive population which is also our source of individuals for new populations. We must secure it before we can establish any additional populations in the wild.

This finding turns roughly 30 years of assumptions upside down. Up till now we have managed the captive population as a separate entity from the nonessential experimental population. We will no longer do that.

Frankly, if we cannot secure the captive population by managing the two together much like we've done with the Puerto Rican parrots and the California condor we can lose the red wolf.

Relative to the red wolf's genetics there is not a lot of agreement as we expected. The peer-reviewed von Holdt research published earlier this summer is an important piece of the science we are considering. We know the scientific debate in this area will continue. We are moving forward with the belief that the red wolf remains a listable entity. The red wolf's historic range has also been relatively consistent source of debate given different interpretation and limited historical specimens.

The Wildlife Management Institute concluded in their report that an accurate predictor of the red wolf's range includes all or part of a significant part of the Southeast United States including North Carolina. The Recovery Team

generally agrees with these results. The Service will work hard to identify other potential sites for nonessential experimental populations.

Hybridizations with coyotes is an ongoing challenge that is exacerbated by human caused mortality particularly when a pack has lost one of the breeding adults close to mating season. We need to continue working with partners on the challenges this presents to the recovery effort.

Additionally the North Carolina Wildlife Resource Commission is helping with a substantial human dimensions project on canids. That includes the red wolf that will be completed in 2017. We thank them for their help with this issue we've been working on.

We know there are challenges with landowners and this work is crucial to better understanding and greater clarity about different opinions and attitudes of our citizens.

Our reality is red wolves in the wild will require intensive hands on management at this time. Nothing about this is simple. There's also a fair amount of grey area within which we must make the best management decisions we can that are based on the best science available done within the bounds of the lulls.

And we will do what we believe is in the best interest for the recovery for this species. The steps I shared with you today would take time. But they also reflect our best professional assessment of the latest science. We believe they chart a clear path toward the red wolf's recovery.

There will be significant opportunity for citizens and stakeholders to engage in this dialogue and help us moving forward. We are under no illusion about the difficulties we face. Understanding the path is important if we are to succeed in the future working together.

Now I'll be glad to take a few questions. Thank you very much.

(Stacy) we are ready for questions.

Coordinator: Thank you. At this time if you would like to ask a question please press star 1 on your touchtone phone. Again that is star 1 on your phone. You will be asked to record your name. Please standby for the first question.

Our first question comes from Corbin Hiar. You may ask your question.

Corbin Hiar: Hi. Thanks for taking my call, question. I guess I remember (unintelligible) wolf with litigation. There's a number of lawsuits. And works over the Red Wolf Program, how do you expect this decision to affect us?

Cindy Dohner: Well because you just said it yourself that this is current litigation we can't talk about that. And I'll ask Leo is there anything else that...?

Leopold Miranda: No. No comment.

Cindy Dohner: No comment. Sorry about that.

Corbin Hiar: Okay.

Coordinator: Thank you. Our next question comes from (William Largeness). You may ask your question.

(William Largeness): Yes. My question is I thought that the biologist at UCLA, Robert Wayne, found out that red wolves are about 75% coyote ancestry. So I'm curious about how they're still protected under the ESA.

Leopold Miranda: (Unintelligible).

Cindy Dohner: So could you please repeat that. And I'm going to ask Leo Miranda to answer this question.

(William Largeness): Sure. I thought that the biologist at UCLA found that the red wolf is of 75% coyote ancestry.

And if that is the case I thought that it would not be covered under the ESA.

Leopold Miranda: Yes. And I'll take that question. As Cindy mentioned earlier that's very important piece of information, very recent scientific peer-review paper that we are definitely considering right now.

But the red wolf still a listed entity. If more information comes to support that paper or to go against that paper, that controversy, we'll continue. We'll go through the process to reevaluate the scientific information.

But yes, we're well aware and we're considering that very important paper.

Jeff Fleming: Okay, (Stacy).

Coordinator: Thank you. Our next question comes from (Jonathan Drew). You may ask your question.

(Jonathan Drew): Hi. I was reading some of the documents that were posted along with the news release. And describing, one of the documents describes how the project will be shifted from a five county project to a one county project within Dare County on federal lands.

So my question is after that, those new parameters take effect in 2017 what will happen to wolves found in the wild outside of that area in Dare County?

Cindy Dohner: That's a very good question. And Leo is going to talk about that one.

Leopold Miranda: Yes. So thank you for the question. Yes. That's the proposal that we are going to put forward. Just a clarification is that it's not – it's just a proposal for now. And we will need to go through the – all the rulemaking process and environmental compliance of it.

If we get to the point of decision on completing that rulemaking process with one county NEP then the animals that are outside that one county NEP will be removed and incorporated into the captive breeding population as one metapopulation basically combining the two captive breeding populations with the wild NEP. That if we end up as proposed will be one county in Eastern North Carolina.

(Jonathan Drew): And I noticed these documents also contemplate combining or allowing intermingling of the captive population and the wild population. How will that

work? I mean is there any limit to how many wild wolves can be taken into the captive population?

Leopold Miranda: Right now in terms of the details we still need to work those out together with the partner institutions.

But as Cindy mentioned we have really good examples across the nation with the California condor, the Puerto Rican parrot, where the captive breeding populations are managed as one together with the wild component so because the (ration) community we do have a lot of experience in managing metapopulations like this one.

Jeff Fleming: Thank you (Stacy).

Coordinator: Thank you. Our next question comes from (Lisa Sorick). You may ask your question.

(Lisa Sorick): Yes. I was wondering what the annual budget for this particular Red Wolf Management and Recovery Program has been maybe in the last five years? And what it will be going forward now that it's moving just to one county?

Leopold Miranda: This is Leo. And I can take that question too. Right now the annual budget is \$1.2 million a year. And we're going to operate this proposal within that budget. So we as we mentioned in our documents we will be repurposing and shifting resources to meet our goals.

Cindy Dohner: So I would just, this is Cindy Dohner, and I would just like to add that although we are proposing to minimize the area for the nonessential

experimental population we will have to increase the capacity needed for the captive population. We have more than 40 facilities across the nation through the American Zoological Association or AZA that helps us managing the captive population.

And through that process and through other types of tools that we are working to develop like a Landowner Incentive Program or making sure we have GPS callers, this program will continue to be a program that we will be working for. And the call to action is because we're going to have to leverage the dollars we have to go forward.

(Lisa Sorick): Thank you.

Jeff Fleming: Thank you (Stacy).

Coordinator: Thank you. Our next question comes from (William Largeness). You may ask your question.

(William Largeness): Yes. Oh so basically I have a little bit of a follow-up here. So you're basically taking the Captive Breeding Program. Was that – did the Captive Breeding Program go back to the original wolves or was it also potentially diluted from wolves outside but what you're doing now is taking the experimental wolves in the wild and mixing them with the 12 breeding pairs and the Captive Program, number one.

And number two, I thought that Fish and Wildlife had the authority to remove no more than 12 wolves in the Captive Program. Yet it's removed somewhere

over 100. So are you going to recover those and release them back or how is that going to work?

Leopold Miranda: And this is Leo. I think that I can follow-up on those questions. But yes, the 12 animals that are right now represented from the original founders are still represented both in the captive breeding population and the wild population. And if we move on as proposed we will be able to manage those two populations as one trying to maintain the entire genetic diversity of the entire species.

In terms of the question on taking animals out of captivity, yes, we recognized that back when we did the first evaluation in the Wildlife Management Institute that we did remove more animals than our rule actually said.

And those and right now we have the current situation on the approximately 45 animals in the wild and plus the 200, a little bit over 200 animals in captivity. So that's what we have right now to work with.

(William Largeness): And then finally so when you guys were talking about existing capacity, will there be more zoos that you'll be signing up or where will you find the individuals, the space, the institutions to raise more wolves?

Leopold Miranda: Yes. And that's a call to action. We definitely need to get the current zoos, maybe some others. We need to increase the capacity in those zoos in terms of space. That's actually the limiting factor we have right now.

Jeff Fleming: All right (William). We're going to ask (Stacy) to see if anybody else is in the queue.

Coordinator: Yes. Our next question comes from Corbin Hiar. You may ask your question.

Corbin Hiar: Hi. Thanks again. Wondering if the population of 200 something both in captivity is not secure and out population is right now at 45 and you're going to be taking some of the wolves out of the wild. What will that mean for the even smaller population left in the wild? How will those packs sustain themselves without in-breeding?

Cindy Dohner: Thank you for that question. I'm going to ask Pete Benjamin who is the Field Office Supervisor and manages this program to answer that one.

Pete Benjamin: Yes, thanks. This is Pete Benjamin. The wild population in Northeastern North Carolina going forward is going to require intensive management in that smaller NEP area.

And as Cindy noted, you know, where you're going to need to manage the wild population and the captive population is one metapopulation to make the best use of and maximize the genetic diversity overall. That's going to mean necessarily moving animals between the two populations to deal with genetic diversity and in-breeding and those types of issues. That we encounter currently with the small population that we have.

Jeff Fleming: Hey (Stacy).

Corbin Hiar: And so just to follow-up does that mean that, you know, if, you know, one of the wolves in Dare County leaves to try and or leaves one of the refuges to try

and breed with wolves at the other refuge and is then picked up, would they then be sent to captivity?

Pete Benjamin: I guess I'd say just the details of how we are going to manage the Northeastern North Carolina wild population going forward are all going to have to be laid out and vetted through the rulemaking process that Cindy alluded to.

And through that we'll have a clear sense of exactly how that population is going to be managed. And there'll be plenty of opportunities for public comment and input as we develop that.

Jeff Fleming: And Leo.

Corbin Hiar: Is there (a time)? Is there...?

Jeff Fleming: Leo, I think is going to jump here Corbin.

Leopold Miranda: Yes and just...

Corbin Hiar: Sure.

Leopold Miranda: ...quick clarification that in the meantime while we do these rulemaking – go through the rulemaking process we're going to be operating under the current NEP rule that we have in the books right now.

Cindy Dohner: Good point.

Jeff Fleming: All right, thank you Corbin. (Stacy).

Coordinator: Thank you. The next question comes from (Jonathan Drew). You may ask your question.

(Jonathan Drew): Hi. A question on the federal lands, back in 2006 when the wolf population was up to around 130 in the wild, how many of those wolves were living or staying within the federal lands that would be part of this new NEP area?

Cindy Dohner: Pete can you answer that please?

Pete Benjamin: Yes. I don't know the specific number of wolves. We have traditionally one pack of wolves whose territory is more or less completely within the bounds of Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge and other. You know, over the years we've had at times more than the one pack using predominantly the refuge.

(Jonathan Drew): Okay. And how many animals will be in each pack?

Pete Benjamin: That's always variable year-to-year and pack to pack. You know pack can be as little as a breeding pair or typically would include the breeding pair and offspring from the current season and prior breeding seasons.

Jeff Fleming: Okay thank you Pete. Appreciate that. (Stacy).

Coordinator: Thank you. Our next question comes from (Beau Peterson). You may ask your question.

(Beau Peterson): Thank you very much. Mr. Benjamin a couple things, first of all, a quick follow-up, the one pack that's almost completely in the Alligator River, what's that population now? Do you know?

Pete Benjamin: I don't have those numbers right in front of me. It is a healthy pack of at least the breeding pair and some of the prior year's offspring and the pups from this year.

(Beau Peterson): Okay and...

Jeff Fleming: (Beau) we'll follow-up with you.

(Beau Peterson): Yes. The actual – well thank you. The actual question is you're attempting to mix, go back and forth between the wild population and the captive population. Do you have any experience with that? And what's the level of concern for reintroducing a wild animal to a captive population?

Pete Benjamin: Yes.

Leopold Miranda: Yes.

Pete Benjamin: Go ahead.

Leopold Miranda: Yes. This is Leo. We do have experience in – with other canid colonization. And as well as other species that, a couple of examples that Cindy mentioned the California condor and the Puerto Rican parrot.

But yes, that – right now that’s a very standard operating procedure in how to manage population that when they have both captive breeding population and wild populations.

(Beau Peterson): But a parrot and a condor is not a wolf.

Leopold Miranda: Yes. But we do have other wolf species that we’ve been managing both captive and wild population. For example Mexican wolf.

(Beau Peterson): Mexican wolf, okay. Thank you.

Jeff Fleming: Thank you (Beau); (Stacy), anybody else?

Coordinator: At this time I show no additional questions.

Jeff Fleming: All right. Well thank you everybody. Again my name is Jeff Fleming. You can if you have other questions as you review the material, don’t hesitate to holler at myself. I’m at 404-679-7287 or 404-274-6693. Also you can find the material again as I noted at [fws.gov/southeast](http://fws.gov/southeast), should be up and running today. And if you have any other questions please don’t hesitate to holler at us.

Thank you for your interest in the Red Wolf Program. And we’ll talk to you soon. (Stacy).

Coordinator: Thank you. That concludes today’s conference. You may disconnect at this time.

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