

Constructive Conflict

Conflict happens. We make it constructive.

PEOPLE AND RED WOLVES: CONFLICT ASSESSMENT & RECOMMENDATIONS

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June 2024

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have enormous gratitude to the 155 contributors to this assessment. Ninety-two contributors are named in the appendix. These named contributors engaged in multiple hours of one-on-one conversations with me, such that I felt I was able to get a comprehensive understanding of their perspectives, needs, concerns and hopes. Another 63 contributors to the report were equally valuable, but because of limited time, opportunity, an inability to follow-up, or simply because we met in a group context and had limited one-on-one time together, I felt I was not able to gain a full accounting of their perspectives. As such, I feel uneasy putting someone's name on a document that they didn't have as much of an opportunity as others to shape.

Still, all of the people I connected with and listened to shaped this report. And each of you generously shared your time, perspectives, experience, wisdom and insights with me, often over many hours, on multiple days and over many miles. You welcomed me into your home, truck, office, family, front porch, back deck, combine harvester; you shared a window into your life. You met with me in person, virtually, on the phone, in the field, while harvesting or hunting, while trapping or monitoring, on a walk, in a chair, with a dog. You connected me with your neighbor, your adversary, your family, and your colleague. You fed me, gave me directions (and in one case even escorted me to my next meeting because I was lost!), gave me a seat and a beverage, led me on a tour, gave me a T-shirt for my child, gave me shed antlers for my dog, gave me a rich accounting of your experiences, gave me a laugh – and you shared with me and showed me what is most sacred to you. For your gracious welcome, for every minute of time, for your honesty and vulnerability, for taking a risk to trust me, for your enormous care and thoughtfulness, I am deeply humbled, honored and grateful.

This report represents an overview of the perspectives and concerns shared with me over about 18 months from January 2023 - June 2024. I have attempted to winnow down more than one thousand pages of notes from our conversations into this document. For any errors or missteps, I apologize. I have also listened to and included your ideas for how I might serve you going forward and what you have suggested might work for all sides to engage in this conflict.

The bulk of this document reports the various perspectives shared by those interviewed as part of this conflict assessment. I have tried to ensure that these sections are true to the voices, concerns and perspectives, but without revealing individual identities. To ensure that the draft report was accurate, I engaged multiple contributors from each group to verbally review the section of the draft report that was relevant to them and their community/group. A special thank you to all of you who took the time to ensure that I captured the range and depth of views within your group, including your own, and used the right words, tone, and nuance to describe those perspectives.

In these conversations, I sensed great concern about the depth and history of the conflict, I heard despair, anger, frustration, exhaustion and bitterness. But I also heard feelings of positive resolve, and even occasional hints of cautious optimism about what it could mean to really hear

one another, to understand and engage with every side's reality, and to establish a starting place to come together and work through the many challenges in this conflict.

Finally, you may notice in this report that 'Red Wolves' is capitalized. While I recognize that several who contributed to this assessment have significant concerns about the legitimacy of the canid species in Eastern North Carolina (ENC), a tribal nation requested that where the reference is made, it is capitalized. I would like to honor this request, while also noting that others may take issue with it. It is not easy to walk the line between worldviews, so I ask you, the reader, for grace as I attempt to try.

With much warmth, respect and gratitude,
Francine

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

In December 2022, Constructive Conflict, whose principal is Francine Madden, was contracted by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) as a third party neutral (TPN) to assess and engage with the conflict over Red Wolves in the Albemarle Peninsula region of North Carolina. Our involvement in any intervention is contingent upon the following: One, we work for everyone equally, not just the entity who hires us. My team and I are responsible and accountable to all those impacted by this conflict, regardless of who contracts us. This is an essential starting place for me and my team if we are to begin to earn our neutrality with you and support meaningful progress for all. Two, confidential information remains confidential. Three, non-confidential information is shared equally and transparently with all concerned. As an example, until this report is finished and made available to everyone who participated in its content at the same time, no one individual or side has laid eyes on the complete report. Three, beyond the conflict assessment, our further engagement is conditional upon the willingness of parties to have me and my team continue to engage as a TPN, as well as my ongoing assessment that our engagement does no harm and can lead to meaningful benefits to all sides.

Over the course of 2023 and early 2024, we learned from at least 155 people who are impacted by this conflict. This included people from the five counties of the Albemarle Peninsula (AP), including farmers, trappers, hunters and outfitters, land managers, business owners and staff, parents, community leaders, and others; federal government staff and leadership locally, regionally and nationally from USFWS and USDA; state and local government, including elected and appointed officials, leadership and staff; red wolf advocates, based locally, in-state, regionally and nationally, as well as those from NGOs, those involved in captive breeding programs, and hobbyists and professionals engaged in tourism or photography related to red wolves; and individuals representing tribal or multi-cultural communities with a direct connection to NC, the AP or Red Wolves.

Most initial interviews occurred over a 2-4 hour period, typically in one-on-one sessions. Some lasted all day. I also interviewed many members from all groups multiple times over this time period to learn about ongoing changes and developments and gather new information and ensure I had a clear understanding of the information that was provided and that my understanding accurately reflected the perspectives and concerns shared. During the 18 months from my first conversation to the completion of this assessment, I also was involved in several other activities and processes. These include but are not limited to: several 'same-side' or intra-group processes ranging from multiple hours over many months to a handful of evenings over a year to intense week-long group engagements. There were mediated discussions between two people from different "sides", larger group processes that gave space to one "side" in the conflict or that sought to reconcile conflict within or between sides. Some engagements were about understanding the past and others about how to move forward into the future.

After the assessment was written in draft form, multiple members of each “group” or “side” were engaged to review the sections of this report that are relevant to them and their contributions to ensure that what I wrote accurately reflected their views and values (and those of their group) and were suitable for broad dissemination, while protecting anonymity and confidentiality. Where clarifications were needed or errors corrected, they were. To develop the list of individuals who contributed to this assessment, many members of each group (and subgroup) were asked to suggest names of other members of their group (or subgroup) or of another group. I then made every attempt to meet with and learn from every person recommended, or as many as I could, but no doubt some were missed. If I missed someone, I apologize; and I hope those perspectives still made it into this report by one of the other 155 people who contributed to this assessment.

My goal was to ensure that every group, and relevant subgroups within each group, were able to contribute to the development of the interviewee lists to ensure that the final report included a rich and varied set of perspectives within and across all groups through this assessment. While no doubt there are gaps in my understanding, I hope this assessment gives the reader at least a sense of what the conflict looks like both within and across groups.

After the perspectives section, there is a section noting some of the common ground and the final section of this report explores a possible general path forward. Please do not take this as ‘written in stone’. This section is simply a synthesis of the recommendations that came out of discussions with people on all sides of this conflict. It represents a possible, or perhaps likely, set of next steps for your consideration. Let me know what you think.

ASSESSMENT LIMITATIONS

This conflict assessment provides a snapshot of the conflict as of the present moment, with a backward review of the history of conflict to date. As such, it cannot convey all the dynamic potential of the system going forward. Conflict is dynamic and continually evolving, just as individuals and groups of people are constantly changing. Perspectives often varied between individuals within each group, as well as between groups. Perspectives even evolved, in some cases, throughout the assessment and as various individuals and groups engaged with me and each other in a different way.

This report seeks to capture in broad brush strokes the range of perspectives, concerns and desires expressed across a wide array of people throughout the assessment time period. As such, it may be that the reader will occasionally be surprised to find opinions both within their own group and/or within another group that diverge from what might be expected. As much as possible, I have tried to qualify the relative prevalence of a given perspective of the conflict using terms like “one noted that...” or “several expressed a concern about...”.

Despite the extensive and diverse list of contributors involved in this assessment, it is important to recognize that this is only a partial assessment of involved and impacted people because there are still voices that were not captured. Even among those perspectives that were captured, there are likely to be gaps in terms of the breadth and depth of what could be covered in this document, if only because it would be impossible for someone to share everything about their perspectives and experience of a complex conflict in a single interview (or even multiple interviews).

PERSPECTIVES OF THE CONFLICT BY GROUP

All perspectives in this section are those of the individuals who comprise the respective community, group or agency in which they belong. Views represent solely those interviewed, not the third party neutral who interviewed them. The following four sections – respectively titled **Local Albemarle Peninsula (AP) Community, Red Wolf Advocacy Community, North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC or WRC), United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)** – represent the range of perspectives on the conflict as experienced and expressed solely by the individuals within and across each group. Where an individual may fall into more than one group, either their perspectives were contained in the section relating to the group with whom they have a predominant affiliation (for instance, a Red Wolf advocate (NGO or USFWS) living on the AP because that's where the RWs are, and thus their views would be represented in the section affiliated with their organization, rather than being contained in the section on Local AP Community, even as they may technically belong to both groups) or where there are individuals deeply connected to or rooted in more than one group, their perspectives may be included in more than one group (e.g., a local landowner who is also on the WRC Board of Commissioners). In the appendix is a list of names for all those who graciously participated in a lengthy one-on-one interview with me. There is also a tally in the appendix showing the number (but not names) of additional people with whom I had the honor of learning from, as well, but through either a shorter one-on-one conversation or in the context of a group discussion, where, in either case, a full, in-depth, one-on-one interview was not possible. As a result, while I want to honor their time, insights and experiences, I also want to recognize that we did not have sufficient time together for me to learn the full range of their concerns, perspectives and needs, so I did not list these individuals by name.

Local Albemarle Peninsula Community (AP)

Many people who had been living on the Albemarle Peninsula (AP) – which includes Washington, Beaufort, Tyrrell, Hyde, and Dare Counties of North Carolina (NC) – since the early days of the reintroduction effort described what they remember feeling when Red Wolves (RWs) were being reintroduced. They spoke of an initial excitement, an openness for tolerance, a mix of feelings that were both tentative and curious, and/or even a sense of trust in what was happening and by whom. One person remembered commenting that ‘not everyone gets to have them.’ Others described the wolves as beautiful and interesting or expressed excitement at the idea of being able to see RWs in the wild. Some described how the RWs were on the land first. Some that talked about being initially open to tolerating the wolves shared that their willingness was contingent on the shared understanding that RWs would be living primarily on private property, which would affect landowners. Many associated their capacity for tolerance with RWs being considered a non-essential experimental population. Others recollected that their initial openness to tolerating the RW reintroduction was predicated on the promise by USFWS that RWs would remain on the refuges and that if the wolves moved to private land, the USFWS would pick them up and bring them back to the refuge. One noted they were willing to tolerate and support the reintroduction and recovery of RWs because of the promise of one day being able to hunt and trap the delisted species.

After sharing their early, more positive feelings, many then described how they felt USFWS’s subsequent actions eroded both the good feelings and trust over time. Various people perceived that the USFWS: had taken advantage of their welcoming nature, broken promises, operated or managed the RW Program or the refuges or both poorly, been deceptive, inconsistent, and arrogant. Some broken promises mentioned include: RWs would stay on the refuge and if not, the USFWS would pick them up; RWs don’t eat deer; RWs don’t ‘pack up’. While some can still name a person here or there that they liked and trusted in the early years, in large part, the sentiment shared was one of the agency losing the community’s trust, which in turn deeply impacted their willingness to continue to welcome or support the RW Program. Meanwhile, for others, their recollection was that they never wanted the RWs to begin with. They recall feeling that the program was imposed on them. One landowner described that if the USFWS hadn’t been bullies, the community would have supported, or at least tolerated, the RWs. But because the agency was perceived to have operated in an oppressive manner, some mentioned that members of their community felt the need to retaliate against the wolves in order to strike back at the USFWS. One local commented that hunters are mistakenly blamed for the majority of RW mortalities, but that in reality, it got to the point where people would shoot RWs to get back at the USFWS. (One reviewer, who very much wants the program to end, noted that, in his circles, he never heard of anyone doing this. He added that it sounds petty and reflects poorly on his community.) Another reflected that since the USFWS didn’t honor private property rights, it turned good people into criminals. Others commented that most people wouldn’t shoot a RW intentionally, but there are sometimes young men who drink and drive around and shoot anything that moves, and this is not something they like or condone. Some community members perceived that the AP was chosen as the RW reintroduction site

because the human population was low, they thought the people were dumb and/or nice, and the USFWS (and NGOs) didn't care about them and/or wanted to run the local people out of the area and turn the AP into a wild area.

Many in the local community perceive that there has been a lack of any acknowledgement from the USFWS that previous mistakes had been made by their agency. This is an underlying issue for many – the lack of ownership by the USFWS for past mistakes. Another source of common concern and frustration is the perceived waste of money spent on the program historically and currently, especially as many deem it a failure anyway.

Many noted that they and their community take a lot of pride in their hard work and resilience while also speaking to how they rely on one another, rather than the government, to recover from hard times. One described their community as 'the forgotten people' who are used to being in bad situations but can always rely on their neighbors. Some described how they had thought USFWS would make a good neighbor but were disappointed when this proved false. There is frustration from many that the community is not being meaningfully engaged by USFWS. Some described that when USFWS say 'landowners are the priority', this is merely lip service, as the reality to them is that they are not prioritized at all.

A few discussed that things have improved somewhat with USFWS, as they are perceived to at least be more responsive now. Some community members shared their appreciation for individual USFWS staff who are genuine, helpful and operate with positivity. One particular local USFWS staff member was praised by many for being genuine, not afraid to answer questions and for having a knack for pushing back without using a hammer. Some who had expressed frustration in early 2023 that the USFWS had never come to talk with them and get to know them as people expressed appreciation when staff later did so.

Many community members described how wolves are viewed by the community as a polarizing issue that creates division and conflict in the community. They spoke of their community deeply valuing their sense of belonging and their efforts to get along and comply, particularly publicly, with the predominant values and beliefs of the community. As such, several community members reported avoiding sharing their more positive opinion about RWs and the RW Program because it usually differs from their neighbors. Their main concern is losing friends, respect or revenue. One local landowner, who spoke at length about being against the RW Program, asked what I was hearing from others within the community. I said a lot of people so far shared his views, but some said they liked RWs, while adding that they didn't feel safe sharing that view publicly because of the potential negative impacts to them and their family, both socially and economically. In response, the landowner responded that it made him feel badly that people in his own community didn't feel like it was OK to share a difference of opinion.

Many landowners described how they perceived the RW Program had impeded, or could impede, upon their lives and livelihoods, their freedom of movement, their identities and rights, security, sense of control, ability to manage their private lands or hunting. There is a

perception by some that if the RW population was to increase, access to hunting would be restricted. Some mentioned a benefit, that Red Wolves were the reason why the military couldn't set up an airfield in the AP. Some farmers acknowledged that having RWs on their land saved them thousands of dollars a year from crop loss because the wolves chased the deer away.

Some described that they will not partake in the Prey for Pack (P4P) program because they fear having RWs on their land would mean further loss of rights including, for example, having the ability to conduct controlled burns. Others described how participating in the P4P Program meant they were being paid to create problems for their neighbors, which they were not willing to do. A couple individuals noted that they didn't want to do the P4P because it would convey a positive opinion about RWs and the program that they didn't feel comfortable having their neighbors know about. Some described how they and others within their community have wanted to do P4P, but the financial match requirement was a barrier for them.

Members of the multicultural community of the AP spoke to their pride in the history of their community where people of different races and cultures worked, married and lived side by side, even during a time in US history when racial segregation was the norm. One spoke about a story heard from his father of their tribe's symbiotic relationship with the wolf on the AP. Wolves were described as being a critical part of local Native American culture, along with bison and paw paw. It was relayed that in the Secotan Tribe, wolves were traditionally captured, leashed and used to help the people with their hunting. The story goes that after the harvest, the wolves were released. Other stories and descriptions were relayed regarding their behavior, events and interactions with native peoples.

Many landowners shared their deep concerns about the management of wildlife refuges, especially water management and especially Pocosin Lakes and Mattamuskeet NWRs, with some expressing that both farming and RWs cannot survive in the current environment. Several commented that they were largely indifferent to RWs, that this was not a high emotion issue for them, but rather, water management and the refuges are their real high emotion issue. Several also discussed that the community's tolerance for RWs would increase if the refuge was managed properly. Another described that if two private parties were involved in the current refuge management situation, litigation would have ensued, and the flooding would have had to have stopped. Another suggested that USFWS should take better care of the refuge, given they own it. Some people discussed how they are always told the refuge is chronically understaffed, with one person suggesting USFWS should consider a water management board and another suggesting enlisting local people as either volunteers or employees. Frustration and anger about the refuges and their management was common and included: water runoff on private land, a reduction in county tax base, poor management generally, and people on the refuge getting too close and habituating the wolves. Many people commented that they would be totally fine with RWs on the AP if they just stayed on the refuge. One farmer noted that if he allowed his dogs to run into the refuge, he would be breaking the law; but the USFWS allows its dogs and its water to run onto his property and yet that's somehow OK. Another farmer

expressed offense about tourists or photographers illegally trespassing on his private land to photograph RWs.

Coyotes were raised as a common problem by nearly all interviewed, with several noting that RWs are *not* the problem, the coyotes are. More than one person noted, 'I would take a wolf over a coyote any day.' Many landowners discussed that having the support they need to manage coyotes would be beneficial for both the landowners and the RW Program. Many spoke about how, after the lawsuit filed by the NGOs to stop people from hunting coyotes at night, things really blew up and animosity toward the USFWS, NGOs and the RWs escalated dramatically. Several people also suggested that RWs would never survive on the AP because of the coyote hybridization, among other things, and thus efforts should be made elsewhere to recover RWs. Some mentioned that they felt the USFWS increased its deception when the coyotes came in. They felt the USFWS was really just interested in keeping their jobs because the community was told that part of the reason the AP was chosen was because it had no coyotes and that was necessary for RWs to survive, but then when coyotes showed up, the USFWS changed their story.

Some community members shared additional challenges the community is facing including churches closing, the quality of public schools, and the lack of grocery stores, among other problems. Others described the challenges of living in the AP in terms of gainful employment (given there is no real industry outside of government, fishing and agriculture) and the threat of hurricanes and saltwater intrusion. Others described that they perceived businesses were doing quite well, but the community never saw the promised economic benefits of having RWs as they were originally told. Despite these challenges, some discussed the entrepreneurial spirit of the AP community and believed there could be opportunities to monetize RWs through ecotourism, including lodging and kayaking tours. Others talked about including ecotourism on farmers liability insurance, so they could operate new businesses, or offering discounts for local restaurants when people come to see the RWs.

Among those who have been most vehemently and vocally opposed to RWs, at least one shared their sense that the wolf is beautiful, majestic and not itself a problem, while another felt the wolf is significantly negatively impacting their hunting revenue. Collectively, however, there is a shared grievance around private property rights violations, a feeling of being deceived and lied to by the USFWS for 30 years, the illegitimacy of the species, and the abuse of power by the federal government. Others noted that while they may share some or many views with this more vocal opposition, they felt uncomfortable with the divisive approaches being deployed. Reasons given for why things seem to have quieted down in recent years, several local people noted it's still there, largely channeled onto a hunting forum, while several others noted it's likely to re-emerge if the RW Program shows signs of growth again or, more prominently, if the political leadership of the country changes. (This latter hope for the upcoming presidential elections was reported to fuel a sense that a change of administration was the best or only path forward. Meanwhile, others noted that any change would only be temporary until the next election cycle.) Others expressed uncertainty as to why things seem

quieter now, but noted for themselves that they no longer go to public information meetings because nothing ever changes and it's a waste of time.

To that end, many within the community discussed how they feel they do not have a voice in the RW Program and that public information meetings are: pointless; condescending; not designed for listening or discussion; a formality where the USFWS doesn't really take into account what people say and just do what they want regardless; not focused on topics the people want to talk about; or not well publicized (by design). Some offered suggestions for changes, including having a social event and asking the community for their advice on how to make the RW Program work better or even shifting the way they approach the community by asking what USFWS can do for you. Some also noted that soliciting the local people's opinions on things, rather than having them only ask questions about the USFWS content could help. Venue and acoustics, in addition to shorter presentations, were also described as important. People did appreciate receiving information that they were interested in and the opportunity for one-on-one or small group discussions with staff. Still, even if the above improvements happened, projected interest in attending future public meetings was commonly described as very low or non-existent.

Landowners felt the 2021-2023 RW Recovery Team needed greater local landowner representation and felt especially frustrated by the contradiction with USFWS's own assertion that they prioritize the local community. One noted that the whole problem of the USFWS and the RW Program could be summed up by the fact that a recovery team of 50 people only had 2 local landowners represented, and even they were only on the recovery team because of their role on the WRC Board of Commissioners.

Many within the AP community shared significant doubts about the RW species and its capacity for recovery, including: whether it's a true species; whether it ever existed in ENC; whether there are any animals in the wild in ENC with a sufficient or significant majority of RW DNA because of hybridization with coyotes; whether captive RWs can survive in the wild or become wild again once released from zoo captivity. Some in the community feel they can point to various sources and evidence that prove that RWs are not in fact a wolf or have such a high percentage of coyote DNA that they all are merely hybrids. Another stated that if it is listed as an experimental population, then it cannot be a wolf; another pointed to a UCLA study where Wolves of the World considered RWs to be a coyote; another discussed that private schools in the region teach that RWs are extinct. Another shared that the USFWS was warned by locals that coyote inbreeding would occur and become a problem and yet the USFWS likes to blame the landowners for why the program is not succeeding. Some landowners described confusion over the stated goal of the RW Program, as they believed the goal was a self-sustaining population, however this has never been achieved. To that end, many look at the last 30 years of effort and cost and note that if there are only 15 or 20 wolves on the landscape today, then that must indicate that RWs can't survive on the AP and the program has failed. Another local, who is not necessarily against the RW Program, noted that giving RWs pet names actually deepens community perceptions that these are not wild animals or not capable of being rewilded once out of captivity.

Several people shared their perception that the USFWS actually wanted to end the RW Program, that they had admitted it had failed, but the NGOs filed a lawsuit and the judge forced the USFWS to continue. Some think the USFWS doesn't really want to continue the program, despite the court order to do so. Many in the community feel that NGOs make a lot of money from their litigation efforts and that they hold a lot of the power, imposing their values and will on the local people, who are the ones who actually live with the RWs.

Despite a lot of entrenched hard feelings across the community, and a number of people feeling unwilling to go against the majority position in their community, over the last year, several local landowners and community members began to quietly explore trying to find a path forward where the people and the RWs could both exist on the AP. The crux of many ideas generated centered around the federal government harnessing significant resources to support community needs – such as, infrastructure, especially for water management, refuge management, education, employment and a return of night hunting of coyotes – in return for the community supporting RWs on private land. Some described how talking through things together – USFWS & the community – would solve a lot, as there is a need for both 'sides' to give and take. Another person noted the timely opportunity for their engagement with USFWS and the NGOs to work on solutions that benefit both people and RWs. This sense of urgency is driven by the possibility that a change in government could eliminate this opportunity, at least until a future administration potentially reintroduces RWs again. Another noted that they had an interest in having level-headed people on both sides - the community and NGOs - to discuss the mutual benefits of returning coyote hunting to the community.

In a recent community meeting, several individuals expressed strong opposition to the idea of ever sitting down with USFWS again. They left early, feeling that the trust was so deeply broken that it could never be repaired, and/or they believed that wolves were harming their way of life and their livelihoods. While several others wanted to continue the discussion, some who had to leave early expressed regret at having to leave before the meeting (which ran very late) concluded, but asked to be included in future discussions. At least a couple dozen people stayed late into the evening wrestling with the possibility of what it could mean to create solutions that benefited the people and the RWs. Even some who spoke early on about unifying and fighting back to end the RW Program leaned in, joining others who had been quiet for much of the meeting. Together, they began exploring what the opportunities could be if they were willing to try – one more time.

Red Wolf Advocacy Community

For purposes of this assessment report, the RW advocacy community includes three subgroups: staff, leadership and volunteers of pro-wolf conservation NGOs; members of organizations that support or engage in captive breeding of RWs; and individuals who regularly photograph or guide people to see RWs on the refuge. This larger umbrella community sees themselves as advocates for or supporters of the recovery of Red Wolves.

There were mixed perceptions around how the RW advocacy community viewed their relationship with USFWS. Historical issues expressed by some NGOs were centered around concerns and rumors that the USFWS was not committed to the RW Program succeeding and were neglecting the RWs out of existence. In 2023, many of the people within this community discussed that, generally, many in their community are wary of the USFWS or of certain individuals, subgroups or levels within the agency. These perceptions softened and relationships grew more positive generally by early 2024. Still, the perceived lack of trust and transparency of USFWS have, in many minds, been central to the historical conflict between USFWS and NGOs. Many shared that some USFWS staff needed to be less defensive and more open to new ideas, partnerships and doing things differently by listening to and considering other perspectives, namely members of the RW advocacy community. A couple of individuals from different NGOs described a different perspective in that they felt USFWS was ready to move on from these past issues, however their NGO was not, as their organization was still stuck in past conflicts. Several expressed robust support for the work of the field staff, but felt either the conflict, or lack of support for RW recovery, or lack of authority for staff to be open and transparent, was higher up in the agency. Again, many of these sentiments of early 2023 softened and grew more positive over time as a result of feelings that the USFWS was trying harder and more genuinely to both recover RWs and build relationships, albeit only fairly recently. Many of the photography subgroup held significant respect for the work of the USFWS to recover RW, particularly the field level staff, while several noted that they felt unfairly maligned and targeted by the agency when they felt they were good stewards for the refuge and RWs.

There is broadening acknowledgement that USFWS has a tough job, and members of all subgroups expressed this sentiment. Some of the examples included: their perception of the pressure they would be under with Congress breathing down their neck; being targeted by lawsuits; having to operate with reduced funding since the 1980s; and generally being beaten up by all sides or facing an uphill climb in their efforts. One shared that within the RW conflict space, USFWS has received the majority of the bullying. It was also noted that the relationship between the USFWS and the NCWRC was very important to RW recovery, and while it hadn't been strong historically, it is currently improving. Still, they felt that the existing resolutions clearly indicated that more work is needed. Some noted concern when they felt the USFWS didn't defend their mandate, the science or the RW Program strongly or consistently enough; and some noted their appreciation when USFWS stood up for the science or the program. That said, some noted that USFWS biologists are trained in science and some do not have the personal capacity to deal with the social challenges of species recovery and conservation. Some

described a perceived disconnect between USFWS staff on the ground and their leaders historically, and a sense that staff on the ground needed and deserved more support from leadership at times. This perception evolved from early 2023 through early 2024 to a sense that leadership was increasingly supporting field staff.

While many in the pro-RW conservation NGO subgroup noted their perception that all tools, including community engagement, are essential for ensuring recovery, many in this subgroup feel the use of litigation is appropriate and needed when other efforts have failed to result in a necessary action, or there is a need to bring new opportunities or push progress, or there is a need to hold the government accountable for fulfilling its responsibilities under the law. That said, others within this subgroup and within the overall advocacy community discussed the damage that litigation can cause in terms of communication and relationships with USFWS and other key groups/communities. Some noted the direct harm litigation causes to RW recovery. Some within this group expressed frustration that some NGOs would rather sue the USFWS than try to have a conversation with them. This did not sit well with those who brought it up, as they felt it would be better to seek to form real partnerships with the USFWS and others to more positively and collaboratively contribute to the recovery of RWs. In 2023, some expressed frustration regarding their perception that the USFWS uses active litigation as an unwarranted excuse not to communicate or collaborate with NGOs. By 2024, there was increased compassion and understanding expressed toward the USFWS and its decisions regarding communication during an active litigation. Some in this community discussed their belief that there is a misconception amongst the community that they (the NGOs) are making money out of lawsuits. Members of the other two subgroups (captive breeding or photographers) either did not comment on lawsuits or expressed concern that lawsuits were counterproductive to the needs of RW recovery or the agency tasked with recovering RWs.

Most in all subgroups shared they would like to, or do, feel good about their efforts to restore and repair their relationships with USFWS and/or build relationships with the local community. As an example, some individuals in the photography subgroup met together to explore ways they, who go to the refuge regularly, could better connect with and share their appreciation for the local community, though they were uncertain how to make that idea a reality. Another in the photography subgroup shared how they would make a point of meeting and connecting with local people when they came to see and photograph RWs at the refuge so they could bridge the gap, particularly between hunters and non-consumptive users who both use the refuge. Some expressed a sense of urgency in helping to find tangible 'wins' for the local community. Several also expressed concern about RWs being targeted and killed locally and that the RWs were trying to recover in a hostile human environment. Some felt their current focus needed to be on preventing RWs from being hit by cars.

Many discussed the need for and importance of USFWS investing the time to develop meaningful and trusted relationships, not just with their own group or the local community but with all sides. One described that there has not been enough time spent or opportunities created historically, for each side to relate to each other, connect as people with one another and that has led to, or exacerbated, the conflict. There was a sense that historically the

USFWS's approach was perceived as being reactive, defensive and focused on narrowly building connections to get work done, rather than truly seeking to build trusting, caring relationships. One expressed a concern that both the USFWS and other NGOs didn't express enough empathy for the concerns of the community at times. An example was given where at a meeting a mother expressed she was very worried for her baby's safety in relation to RWs and was dismissed by both the USFWS and NGOs. This person felt better outcomes would occur if people's fears were acknowledged and their concerns discussed as local people would then feel truly heard. One discussed the need for all to better recognize non-human entities and shift from the concept of tolerance to being hospitable to non-human entities.

A common viewpoint within this RW advocacy community is that the vast majority of people in the AP are neutral about the RW Program, with some quiet supporters and some louder opponents. Some shared their perception that the history of the conflict has more to do with the history of issues related to the refuges and/or their belief that RWs are a 'proxy war' for a conflict with the federal government. Many discussed the notion that conflict related to RWs is exacerbating other natural resource, or wildlife related issues, as well as other social, economic, and cultural conflicts. Many felt that refuge management was a key underlying conflict within the local AP community. One mentioned a desire to demonstrate the tangible, albeit indirect, economic benefits of RWs to the local community, offering as examples: tourists and photographers eating in restaurants, lodging, buying gas, and engaging in other ecotourism activities as part of their visit to see the RWs. They wondered if seeing this evidence might offset the community's sense that the cost of the program was a waste of money.

Many within the RW advocacy community discussed the sentiment that RWs are, in fact, a trigger for some or many in the local community who feel the federal government is threatening the local rural way of life. An example was shared relating a dead wolf to a bullet in the federal government. Many shared that they thought the local AP community takes pride in their sense of autonomy and does not respond well to the federal government telling people what to do. The ban on coyote hunting was viewed by some to have escalated the conflict, while others (including some of the same people) viewed it as a necessary action. The idea of lifting the ban was met with some skepticism or reluctance, since RWs and coyotes look alike, and they feel the community has not demonstrated their willingness to actively avoid incidental take of RWs. Some RW advocates perceive that members of the local community want to be in good standing with everybody within their community, given how they all depend on one another in some way or another. Many also perceive that landowners who may in fact support something, or have a different opinion, will turn against the thing they otherwise support or are OK with, simply because their neighbor doesn't like it. Where the issue arose, many reported deep frustration that law enforcement didn't or couldn't take action against those individuals who illegally kill RWs. In some cases, the illegal killing of RWs by individuals led to prejudicial assumptions about the local community generally.

Better governance to improve the use of resources and coordination between agencies and NGOs was another topic raised. There is a sense that many within the environmental community want to be true partners in the RW Program, with some sharing that it was a good

(and rare) day when USFWS reached out to them. In 2023, for some, but not all, of the organizations that contribute private funds toward RW recovery efforts, there was a feeling of insufficient recognition or appreciation from the USFWS for their contribution and a desire to be seen as a true partner in this effort where they felt they were not treated as such. By spring of 2024, several individuals from NGOs expressed a sense of feeling both appreciated and recognized by the USFWS, in some cases for the first time. Some members of this community noted their own internal disorganization as a larger community (particularly among the NGO and captive breeding subgroups). Examples given include: they don't communicate strategically with one another and/or one organization would do a project that another was already doing, like education, and that would lead to a waste of resources that better coordination could prevent.

Where it came up, typically among NGOs, there was broad consistency by most in the deep concern, anger and frustration expressed about the existing NCWRC resolutions on RWs. These resolutions – the most recent evidence of a long history of animosity towards the USFWS or RWs or both – are seen to impede trust with and increase suspicion of and animosity towards the state agency by the outside public who is largely pro-red wolf. Many described the importance of both the State and Federal agencies being on the same page, in order to lead the community forward. Overall, most of what was shared when discussing NCWRC was centered around their two RW resolutions being an indicator of a government agency that can't be trusted or reasoned with and fails to care about endangered species conservation. That said, one noted that the NCWRC was a good, trusted partner in both wildlife conservation and to their organization.

Many in the RW advocacy community raised historical concerns about the selection and membership process of the RW Recovery Team. It was concerning to some that only two landowners were on the team, given they are critical partners of the project. One person also raised that it did not go unnoticed that any groups that have engaged in lawsuits with USFWS were not on the recovery team. (One reviewer noted this wasn't true since they themselves were on the recovery team during active litigation.) Another shared they believed the USFWS did a good job putting the recovery team together and another said they felt satisfied with results of the process. Some shared concerns over inconsistencies and false starts in the various efforts to launch a RW Recovery Team. Some perceived that the process could have been improved to allow for more meaningful, fair and honest dialogue. One described how USFWS removed a landowner from the recovery team twice. This individual shared that while the views of the landowner were in direct contradiction to those of their own and other RW advocates, they felt uneasy that a landowner was removed after being told there wasn't sufficient space.

Some in this group recognized that while the USFWS have stated they are committed to recovery, they feel a vision for recovery is missing. There is acknowledgement that the success of this program is linked to the future of other wolf reintroductions and many want this process to create a road map for replication that will be functional and efficient. A few within this group raised how they feel it is time to move past the fight over the legitimacy of RWs as a species. A concern was raised that some within the anti-wolf community have requested a study be done

on genetics, expressing that they suspected that if the RW is not deemed a pure species, then the program would end.

Many recognized that ‘same side’ (us vs. us) conflict exists both between the subgroups and within subgroups. Some within the NGO community shared that they felt the photographers could be ambassadors and serve a critical role in educating others, but they have concerns about their conduct, including potentially feeding wolves, rule violations on the refuge, and subsequent issues with habituation. Some members of the photography community expressed similar concerns within their own subgroup, while noting it is not all photographers who behave this way. Another sticking point is an internal conflict about whether or not it’s appropriate to give names to wild animals. Some photographers expressed that they feel they are an easy target for blame, particularly by the USFWS, noting that if other groups were treated the way they are treated now, e.g hunters, there would be a huge backlash against the USFWS. Many, if not nearly all, within this broader community feel gunshot, vehicle strikes and ensuring RW releases are the crux of the problem in recovering RWs, not their individual or collective actions. Meanwhile, another ‘same side’ concern centered around individuals or organizations within this group looking for others to blame while not taking responsibility for, or even seeking to understand, how their own actions could cause unintentional harm to RW recovery. Finally, one reviewer mentioned feeling uncomfortable being associated with some of the opinions of their ‘community’, acknowledging significant differences from their own views while recognizing that others do hold these different opinions.

North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC)

Recognition was expressed by several that historically, NCWRC and USFWS were working at cross purposes regarding the RW Program, while one noted that the two agencies just have different regulatory obligations. Changes in leadership and improved communication between the agencies in recent times have greatly improved relationships and program alignment. One person within NCWRC described how they are trying to change the culture of ownership of the RW Program by encouraging staff to refer to the RW team as “we” rather than “they”.

Despite current improved goodwill and increased positivity regarding the state’s relationship with the USFWS, there are historical issues that linger and a feeling that more progress is needed. Regarding their historical relationship, some staff noted that the USFWS was perceived to be deceptive and broke their promises. One NCWRC staff member commented that the USFWS staff that introduced the RW Program were perceived by many as arrogant. When it comes to current efforts to engage the local community, NCWRC staff and leadership offered constructive feedback around how the USFWS can make improvements to their current efforts. Public information meetings were reported as being ineffective in their current format, with many sharing that a more meaningful process and dialogue is needed. One raised concerns about wolf meeting fatigue and suggested a more creative, social approach might yield better results. Direct engagement with private landowners was seen as a critical way in which to proceed with meaningful stakeholder engagement. Some within the NCWRC also discussed that the RW Recovery Team should have had more local landowners involved. Another person shared a concern in the way USFWS uses language, for example when USFWS frames a RW as having been shot, the public relate this to the hunting community and thus that a hunter shot the RW. It was noted that this could be perceived as offensive and demonizing to many in the AP community by the USFWS (and NGOs who report similarly). It was noted that RWs could be shot not only by hunters, but by any gun owner, including landowners who have the right to protect their chickens, pets, or families.

Many felt that at the heart of the conflict of RW reintroduction was a perceived threat to the AP landowners' sense of control over the things that are important to them, such as their land, identity and way of life. One leader shared that this was the impetus for the Commission passing the 2015 resolutions on the RW Program, in that the NCWRC sought to support the landowners who felt their rights were being taken away by the federal government. Another shared that there were other reasons for the resolutions, including biological uncertainties about the species. Several shared their recognition that RWs will not survive without support from landowners. NCWRC staff expressed an interest in trying to understand how the RW Program could be implemented in a way that assists landowners to meet their needs. One of the ways in which NCWRC discussed helping landowners and increasing tolerance for RWs is by removing coyote hunting restrictions, which gives back a sense of autonomy and helps landowners manage their own property. Further, one expressed that there is a practical aspect to having coyote hunting as a means to reduce the potential for hybridization.

Many NCWRC staff perceive that RWs are viewed by the community as a polarizing symbol that can create community division and conflict. For this reason, some NCWRC staff perceive that members of their own agency have not openly discussed RWs or largely avoided the topic in local communities, as they either want to preserve their relationships or prevent further harm to already strained relationships. Further, it was noted that staff have needed clarity on their agency's involvement in the RW Program and hence hesitate to speak out of turn about a developing partnership. One shared what was referred to as a widespread perception in the agency that RWs are seen to be a money maker for the NGOs. Concern was expressed about the conflict with NGOs, mainly due to lawsuits preventing open communication, improved relationships, and collaboration. There was a desire from many to get out of the cycle in society of pursuing conservation through litigation. Where it came up, staff and leadership expressed a desire to improve their relationships with NGOs, but also a concern about how to do so, especially given the perceived barrier that lawsuits present and the feeling that there never seems to be a time when there isn't a lawsuit going on. Further, many perceive that if the NCWRC speaks even to a non-litigant NGO with whom they have yet to establish trust and tries to build a new relationship there (or repair a damaged relationship), that NGO will report on the conversation to the litigant NGO and one way or another the state agency could get dragged into the current lawsuit. As a result, it was noted that it's often just safer to avoid interactions, especially lengthy ones, until there are no lawsuits. That said, there have been recent efforts to quietly build more bridges with the help of one trusted NGO, which has felt like a safe enough and necessary risk to making progress.

Many NCWRC discussed that they support RW as a valid taxonomic species despite understanding and respecting the many concerns of the AP community. Some agency staff and leadership expressed frustration that members of the public, including the AP community, don't understand that there is no such thing as genetic purity. They feel that society needs to accept some level of coyote hybridization in the wild in order to keep RW DNA.

Concerns were expressed by many about the lack of clear direction and agreed mission and vision of the RW Program. It was noted by many that identifying criteria for success and failure would be helpful. One noted that having an exit strategy was needed if success criteria were not met. There is a general concern in the agency about how and whether the program can be a success and a lack of clarity about what success looks like. Recent efforts to align the state and federal governments working relationships give hope to several that the state agency and the community can perhaps be involved in helping USFWS reset the RW Program's mission and vision.

Most discussed that the RW resolutions (adopted in 2015) do not represent the current sentiment of agency staff. Several noted that there is still some difference of opinion between the agency staff and some or many members of the governing board. That said, those staff also perceived that there is some evidence of a shift toward more cooperation on the board. NCWRC staff discussed that the resolutions could mistakenly reflect that the two agencies are not aligned or unified in their approach on the RW reintroduction program. This perception, many shared, does a disservice to the current genuine partnership efforts of both government

agencies. Several shared that these resolutions are unhelpful in both progressing the partnership with USFWS, as well as the public perceptions of the WRC. In fact, one noted that there is a growing understanding among staff and some members of the Board of Commissioners that the resolutions don't represent the current political and biological realities. Another staff member reported not only wanting to revise the resolutions, but suggested entering into an MOU with the USFWS for the management of all canids on the AP. That said, one expressed their sense that the current resolutions - and any need to amend them - is not really that much of a priority, nor is it a significant need overall, since what is important - the relationships between the two agencies and their alignment on RW recovery - has improved markedly and thus likely negates resolutions that aren't actually shaping or impeding programmatic and relational work.

United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)

Many USFWS staff expressed that they have a strong desire to improve their engagement with the AP community. However, they shared a sense that they don't know the best way to move forward, given the long and deep history of conflict and distrust. Additionally, they feel understaffed to do the essential relationship-building work needed. In 2023, several reflected on their own agency that USFWS staff have been trained largely in wildlife sciences, but comparatively less capacity among staff to both understand the conflict and engage effectively with it. Most USFWS staff noted that the overall group vs. group relationships had broken down to the point where an outside neutral party was needed. Some noted that having an outside neutral party was needed ten or more years ago and that things were better now, so the current effort was out of step with the time of highest need. Others noted that maybe the current calmer conditions presented an opportunity to prevent conflict from recurring down the road. Many others noted that if RWs are to persist, current conflict conditions are still highly unacceptable because they need the local community's willing acceptance of RW on their land, not just a lessening of outward hostility, which is the current status quo. They also noted that regardless of what happens in NC on RW recovery, if RWs are to be reintroduced elsewhere in the Southeast, the USFWS needs to reconcile the long-standing conflicts in NC, particularly with the local community and state agency. That said, several noted with appreciation where they had friendly and respectful relationships with members of the community, with NGOs or with the NCWRC. At the time of this writing, many have noted that positive relationships had grown, notably with NGOs and NCWRC. Some improvement in relationships was reported by one individual, but they also noted it is neither robust nor sufficient at this time.

Demonstrating how staff in recent years have worked to both build and demonstrate their trust with the local community, staff now call landowners when they know that collared RWs are staying in their area and the USFWS have also switched RW collars to a bright orange, rather than black, so community members could identify them more easily.

Several noted that both the perceived antagonism the USFWS receives from the local community and some NGOs is all too common across the US between citizens and the federal government. This deepening hostility over time is both frustrating and exhausting. There is also a sense of frustrated irony - not just locally, but across the nation - that while USFWS staff are accused of not doing enough, the agency's appropriated funding continues to decline. This means the USFWS is continually being asked to do more work with less resources every year, setting up a vicious cycle of mutual frustration and disappointment. Insufficient staffing in both wildlife refuges and the RW Program were noted as prime examples of this vicious cycle that hurts local communities and the resource.

Nearly all USFWS staff acknowledged historical mistakes with how the RW Program was first introduced to the AP community, as well as the lack of equitable and early coordination with

the NCWRC. Many USFWS staff and leaders shared what they've heard from others, particularly in the AP, that the program was felt to have been imposed on the local people, lacked effective, consistent or clear communication with state and local entities, did not have enough involvement or engagement with local residents and landowners, lacked transparency, and provided the community with conflicting information at times. As such, USFWS staff interviewed acknowledged they had understandably received a poor response to the program from the community and state. Still, several pointed out that if mistakes were made by these early staff and leaders, the people working in the USFWS today are not the same people. As such, they note that it can feel frustrating at times that actions made by others historically are still being dredged up and put on today's staff as if they themselves made those mistakes or broke those promises. Moreover, while most, if not all, staff expressed regret about the perceptions and history of how the program was introduced and evolved, especially the impacts to the local community, they also feel that staff 30 years ago likely did the best they could with the agency's knowledge and orientation of the time (which was heavily or exclusively focused on the wildlife, not the people). They also empathized with previous staff that understanding biology and working with wildlife was a lot easier than understanding and working with people.

Many USFWS staff shared that they had missed opportunities to engage with, focus on, listen to and learn from the local community on the AP and the NGOs invested in RW recovery. Some described how their agency had not given landowners due respect for understanding their own lands and natural resources. More than one staff member empathized with how agency staff could have been perceived as arrogant at times. Many raised how they had made a misstep from the beginning in focusing so much on the environmental and biological aspects of the RW Program, rather than focusing equally on the people. A few discussed that relationships with local residents and landowners are and have been overly transactional, for instance by focusing on having access to land, rather than building genuine relationships. Some expressed the sentiment that there is a need to change perceptions in the local community from RWs being a burden to being a benefit. Meanwhile, there is also widespread acknowledgement that the historical distrust and mistakes on the part of the USFWS, and a current limited meaningful engagement with the community has created a lot of hurt and anger which feels hard to come back from. This drives a sense among many that the more immediate need is for a different kind of engagement or process that could first rebuild (or just build) trust on all sides.

Many USFWS staff discussed that their typical public information meetings have been largely ineffective, fueled destructive conflict, and failed to build genuine dialogue. When it came up, staff expressed a deep desire to improve dialogue with the public, even as many expressed concerns that the path ahead did not seem clear or easy or, in some cases, even possible. There is widespread recognition that more is needed for the people of the AP to give them due respect and recognition, a meaningful say in decisions that affect them, and the freedom and autonomy to live their rural way of life. How to bridge that recognition and need with the fraught history between the federal government and community, and with a mandate to

recover RW on the AP was a knot many expressed uncertainty of and concern about how to untangle.

While some positive relationships with NGOs existed in early 2023, recent efforts increased hope among agency staff for more positive, broader partnerships going forward. That said, there has long been frustration expressed by many in the USFWS that some NGOs continue to use lawsuits as a means to effect change without understanding the local context or considering alternatives to or the unintended consequences – or even immediate efficacy - of those actions. While there was some appreciation expressed for the legal effort that led to the RW Program being able to again use the suite of approaches essential to recovering RWs, many more lawsuits, and the broader impression of lawsuits generally, were perceived to cause more harm than good to the species they were designed to protect. This includes the long-term viability of recovering an endangered species, as well as impacts to the community whose acceptance is critical for RW recovery. Further, most feel that lawsuits further fracture relationships and create adversaries among people who are all trying to recover RWs. Another concern expressed about some lawsuits involved NGOs failing to seek alternative paths to problem-solving by first trying to talk with the USFWS staff to explore what the implications might be. This was noted in the context of the unintended negative consequences of lawsuits and/or the limited utility of a lawsuit to have the desired effect when alternative means – like picking up the phone and actually talking with someone in the USFWS first – might prove to provide more benefits, better efficacy, and less negative consequences. Finally, several USFWS staff expressed being notably disturbed and frustrated that their agency was often blamed by members of the local community for being in cahoots with the litigants when it came to filing a lawsuit. In fact, where it came up, staff expressed frustration and burnout regarding the additional workload and stress put on them and their colleagues as a result of litigation and the reality that lawsuits largely take away critical, limited resources from the work of recovering RWs. On top of that, several commented that lawsuits felt like a direct attack on their identity and humanity.

Nearly all staff noted that a productive relationship with NCWRC is critical to the success of the RW Program. Further they noted that having the state agency as a partner was a much better way to recover or conserve wildlife, including endangered species, than the way that the USFWS and NCWRC engaged with each other in the past. Nearly all staff also expressed concerns that the current NCWRC resolutions related to the RW Program remain an underlying cause of concern and an impediment to a trusting partnership and the ability for shared progress. This is mainly due to concerns around the perceived public perception that the two wildlife agencies working on the RW Program are giving two different messages, and indeed opposing ones, and yet call themselves partners in RW recovery. The concern is, at least in part, that if an already distrusted USFWS, tasked with recovering RWs, is in partnership on canid management with a state agency with resolutions opposing RW recovery in the state, it will further undermine the reputation and integrity of the USFWS as an agency committed to RW recovery. Recent discussions regarding this issue gave staff and leadership some sense that

a better aligned partnership and the potential for constructive progress is more possible now than in past years. Finally, to this point, the reason for the concern being more around public perceptions was because current USFWS leadership and staff feel that NCWRC staff and leadership are more constructively and positively engaged in the AP in recent years. Further, individual relationships and open communication between the two agencies have improved significantly, according to all staff where the issue came up. This sentiment lends to their conclusion that what is being asserted in the official position of the WRC (as articulated through their resolutions) is a less accurate reflection of what is happening or being felt internally within the WRC. That said, they felt that the public and pro-wolf advocates don't realize this.

Most staff expressed their sense that wolves are a trigger for many who may feel the Federal Government is impacting their rural way of life, with some describing how landowners feel that because of the RW Program, they have lost or will lose rights on their land. Some shared their perception that the Prey for the Pack Program is not being taken up by many landowners due to these concerns, the lack of trust, lack of broader community support for these efforts which hinders individual willingness to join the program, and a perceived limited return on investment.

Staff report that the conflict over RWs is often a proxy for other concerns – particularly around private property rights, government-citizen divide, the Endangered Species Act, water management, refuge management, government overreach, urban-rural divide, salt water intrusion, etc. The reverse was also noted, in that the concern about these other issues often exacerbated the conflict about RWs – or it reduced community or NGO support for and trust in USFWS to do its job effectively. One leader shared their realization that new federal funding for refuge management is only for federal land, and doesn't include private land. This was seen to limit the opportunity to look at the issues from a larger, integrated system perspective where refuges and landowners can then work together to address challenges with the appropriate funds to do so.

Many USFWS staff reported they perceive that wolves are viewed by the community as a polarizing issue that can negatively impact relationships within the community if differences of opinions are shared (different from the overall negative perception of the program). Some noted that community members have shared privately that they worry they would be ostracized by their neighbors if they shared a positive opinion of RW or the program. As a result, where opinions differed from the accepted public opinion of being against the program, they noted that many chose to refrain from sharing those opinions publicly in favor of maintaining their standing within the community. Some staff discussed their concerns that NCWRC staff do not talk positively about RW for the same reason, as it may compromise their trust and credibility with landowners. Finally, several USFWS staff felt that a considerable portion of the local community was largely indifferent to RW and that it was a relatively small, vocal, but influential minority that was actually deeply against the program.

Other concerns expressed regarding the relationship with NGOs include information shared with NGOs has been leaked or used against the USFWS in the media or in litigation or both. Further, some noted this dynamic has been evident even in situations where the USFWS has made efforts to improve their communication, collaboration and transparency – something NGOs have long asserted they want. It was noted by some that when such efforts by the USFWS are met with what feels like a subsequent attack or effort to undermine the agency, be it by releasing information to the media or posting on social media, or using information against the USFWS in litigation, their motivation to trust and share further declines.

Many expressed a concern that NGOs don't fully appreciate the negative consequences of litigation for both the agency's willingness and ability to collaborate in a hostile relationship and with regard to the very real impacts to RWs in terms of support by the local community. Many staff expressed that most NGOs only see the upside of litigation, or that on balance the benefits outweigh the costs. And yet they note that there are additional costs not considered, resulting in a lack of checks and balances on the merits of litigation as a conservation tool. In 2023, there was a desire for an honest conversation to really explore these consequences with NGOs so that shared progress can be made, and a simultaneous reluctance to do so, particularly with those organizations who use litigation as their predominant tool for effecting change, given they worry whatever they say can and will be used in the media or litigation against the USFWS. In 2024, that conversation occurred, with both non-litigants and litigants not currently litigating. As a result, several noted that RW recovery coordination between USFWS and NGOs has begun to improve recently, even as they realize there's a lot more work ahead. Still, there is a genuine desire to build more mutually trusting, constructive, and collaborative relationships going forward with the NGOs and equally with the AP community.

Some USFWS staff described a more recent challenging development with some or several refuge visitors and some regular wildlife photographers, to different degrees, regarding potentially getting too close to RWs in the wild, violating refuge rules, or by sharing misinformation about RWs through social media. While several staff expressed delight that people value and come to see the RWs, they are concerned about habituation of RWs as a result of visitors and photographers staying too close to the animals. Some staff expressed frustration that some or several photographers do not seem receptive to seeking or receiving correct information from the USFWS, learning from the wolf biologists, or recognizing the link between their actions and the increased likelihood of injury, death or a return to captivity if the wolves become further habituated to people. (More generally, many USFWS staff expressed frustration that people within all groups, not just photographers, are often resistant to hearing facts or science, if they differ from their own opinions.) Staff expressed a keen interest in building on the obvious common ground with these photographers but remain uncertain how to do so, while they simultaneously realize that several photographers may feel villainized for their actions because of recent and historical frustration expressed and actions taken by the USFWS. Further, a previous effort to engage a group of photographers was felt to have backfired, and staff recognize that failed effort may make photographers even more reluctant

to engage in shared learning and opportunities. Still, staff who mentioned it all felt that this was an important relationship and potential ally for RW recovery, and they expressed a strong desire to address this conflict better going forward.

Most staff reflected that vocal AP opposition had become quieter in recent years. Various perceptions around why included: a very small population of RWs on the landscape; the perception that the RW Program will not survive and therefore the fight is no longer needed; personal issues among those in the vocal minority that has taken their attention away from RWs; and a current lack of political receptivity to officially “kill” the program along with an intent to take action when the political climate is more favorable to their interests and concerns.

There is a sense that some staff feel they cater to either end of the vocal minorities rather than targeting the significant middle. One staff member described this as ‘see-sawing’. Another staff member reflected that rarely have they experienced an opportunity for government and citizens to sit down with one another to really get to know one another as people. In the past, this staff member says, people in general in this country were more social and more open, whereas now there is a perception that people are more intolerant of one another, listen to and act upon divisive media, and that there is not enough time invested in one another to relate and build the trust and understanding needed.

All USFWS staff raised concerns in 2023 that not only do they perceive there are trust issues with their agency externally, all perceived trust issues to be amongst and between their internal structural divisions as well. All staff raised the issue of distrust among agency employees and leadership as being a critical issue. This ‘same-side’ conflict was reported by many staff to be one of the hardest challenges they face. There was a strong desire from all who raised this issue to reestablish trust. Some talked about the need to ‘peel back the onion’ or have hard, honest conversations to hear the different perspectives so they can move forward. Not including or drawing on the experience of career professionals was seen to be a factor that damages relationships and trust. A few staff gave examples of perceived overreach in past years regarding decision-making that should be happening at one level but is then done at a higher level which feels inappropriate or out of step with the needs of what’s happening or the skill set at that other level. Some noted frustration with a lack of communication or opportunities for inclusion vertically, both up and down, in the agency hierarchy. Some staff talked at length about how they felt hurt by the internal conflict and described at times feeling exhausted by it. One staff member described the internal trust issues as being the key limiting factor within the USFWS to them being more creative and coming up with workable solutions. While there are still concerns, nearly everyone noted these concerns have lessened significantly or largely dissolved in the last year plus, with many noting specific improvements in internal alignment, trust and process. Regional leadership changes were especially credited with the positive change by all staff with whom the issue arose. Still, some say the historical difficulties and challenges are hard to overcome.

Many reported that the USFWS hierarchical structure, as well as the silos across the agency, make it challenging for people to collaborate, problem-solve and share information. Some feel this comes at a cost, as they are not receiving information or updates from different levels in the agency. Many USFWS discussed how the current slow approval times and processes, for instance in sharing information with the public, mean progress is hampered, public trust is impacted, and field staff often feel they either have little autonomy or they are hamstrung in their communications with people outside the agency. Some described how uncomfortable it is for them personally when a member of the public asks questions of them and they can only respond that they are not authorized to answer.

Many USFWS staff also raised the need for clarity around who has decision-making authority internally and for what decisions. Those that discussed this issue believed the RW Program would benefit from having better decision-making clarity, coordination and structures to improve decision-making, communication and relationships internally, which will lead to improvements externally. Recent progress on these issues over the last several months has given many a sense that they can improve both internal and external relationships, efficiencies, and program progress. Some concern still exists, especially as it relates to future changes in leadership or administration and whether these new proposed changes, once finalized and institutionalized, will continue to be upheld and supported over time.

While the USFWS formally considers the RW to be its own taxonomic species – and many note that this was validated by an independent scientific review by the National Academy of Sciences – and they unanimously assert their commitment to recovering the species, several staff noted a need to determine internally certain policies and definitions in order to effectively recover RWs.

COMMON GROUND

Common ground can emerge both within a group and between different groups. The following areas of common ground were identified during the assessment phase:

- Participants in this conflict assessment recognized there was significant room for improvement in the relationships and trust among and within all groups, but spoke more often to their relationship with the USFWS. This condition exists even where people also noted that they saw improvements in the last year.
- With some exceptions within a subset of the local community, many participants across all groupings expressed support for, and spoke to a need for, an ENC multi-party process to improve trust, build relationships and explore shared problem-solving.
- Where it came up, everyone on all sides suggested the following consideration for each “side’s” representation in a multi-party process:
 - Each individual has a strong commitment to leaning in and finding shared “wins” together for the AP community and RWs. People’s time, effort and engagement need to be valued and have meaning.
 - This requirement is not intended to diminish the feelings or one-sided approaches of members of their own community.
 - This concept originated within the local AP community with a reference made to people on their own “side”. Over 18 months, these considerations for participation were echoed, articulated or agreed to by many on all sides.
- There was widespread acknowledgement that RWs cannot survive on the landscape without the AP community, particularly the landowners. Participants on all sides expressed an interest in finding ways to support and maintain the rural way of life for people living on the AP.
- Concerns about and/or an interest in discussing or addressing water issues and refuge management are widely shared.
- Most sides agree that there is a current lack of understanding about the vision and mission of the Red Wolf Program and what constitutes success. Many wanted to gain or give clarity on the science/genetics of RWs.

AREAS OF DIVERGENCE

Areas of divergence can occur within a group and between groups. The following are some areas of divergence that came up during the assessment phase:

- Legitimacy of RWs as a species
- Viability of RW Program in NC; capacity of RWs to thrive in an area with coyotes; science
- Value of lawsuits
- Economic benefits/costs of RWs
- Trust/trustworthiness of, and appreciation/recognition for, various groups and sub-groups
- Benefits/costs of coyote night hunting ban and opinions on removing ban
- Value of engaging in a multi-party process to explore shared wins for community and RWs vs. ending the RW Program in NC
- Relative strength and appropriate use of power, control, autonomy, including level of legitimacy (e.g., who has skin in the game and how much) of a group's voice in decision-making

NEXT STEPS

Typically, this type of conflict assessment would be completed, the report written and distributed, before any “next steps” occur. That said, every conflict and every situation is unique, and it is the people in the conflict who determine how the overall process will proceed. As such, in the case of the conflict over Red Wolves, specifically in Eastern NC, assessing the conflict and writing the report happened alongside many other activities, meetings, workshops and small group engagements that are too long to list here, and in some cases, confidential and thus inappropriate to include in the context of this report. That said, major stepping stones that are relevant to the development of a multi-party process are noted below, giving the reader a sense of some of what has occurred since early 2023.

If the steps below are written in gray, these items have been either completed, partially completed, or are well underway. If the steps remain in black, they have yet to be implemented.

1. **Understand different perspectives within each group and organize all “sides” in the conflict** in an effort to have each “side” determine who will represent them in the multi-party process. Start to build both “same side” alignment and capacity among those interested, so they are better able to understand and engage productively in the conflicts they face.

Note: With “sides” that are not already organized specifically around the issues being addressed in this report (and as they are relevant to future actions), this type of organizing is a longer-term process beginning with the neutral third party getting to know people on all sides, receiving a mandate from that “side” to assist and facilitate the organizing, and then begin organizing. As governments and NGOs are inherently more organized because they are formal institutions, their requirements are different from groups like the AP community and the photographers. These latter two groups either have governance structures that do not lend themselves as well to the type of organization needed leading into a multi-party process (e.g., the AP community, which has many forms of governance and organization, but none specific to Red Wolves and shared-problem solving with the other “sides” of this issue) or they have little to no formal organization, but simply have similar interests or activities that qualify them as belonging to a group (e.g., photographers on the refuges). As such, one side may be able to quickly organize and determine representation in a multi-party process (e.g., government), while another side may require several types and stages of processes over time to arrive at a representative group who wants to engage in a multi-party process. Note: Because of the time and effort involved, often participants in a “stakeholder” processes are selected by the group or institution convening the process. This is simpler, quicker, but much less ideal because it takes some of the power away from the other “sides” in determining for themselves, as much as possible, who will represent them.

2. **A bottom-up process of self-selection and peer-selection for community engagement:** Convene three additional (four total) open-to-community-only meetings (July 2024; previous meeting May 2024) to learn from and engage with citizens across the five AP counties. Those interested in and committed to exploring opportunities for reconciliation and shared problem-solving with USFWS, NGOs and NCWRC and others through a multi-party process will then convene with similarly minded community members (approximately 25-30 individuals). This group will initially determine additional considerations – beyond the precondition of a willingness to work with one’s adversary to find shared wins – for representation in the multi-party process and determine who will join represent their communities in the multi-party process to begin later in 2024. Both the participants of the multi-party process and the group of 25-30 will be active in soliciting broader community input and sharing information across their county/area, so that whatever progress is made in the multi-party process, it is well engaged with and supported by the AP community.
3. **Photographer organization and representation:** Photographers, both local and those who frequently visit the AP region and refuges, will convene for a meeting to explore needs, conflicts, and representation in the multi-party process. (July-August 2024)
4. **Convene a multi-party process** that includes different views and voices from the AP community, RW Advocacy, NCWRC, and USFWS, among others. Engage initially in building shared understanding of the conflicts, the history, the concerns and needs; focus on rebuilding or building trust and respect; determine areas of exploration for shared-problem solving that benefits both the community and Red Wolves. (Begins fall/winter 2024)

The role of a third party neutral is solely around process and relationships, where the neutral seeks the wisdom, insights and guidance of those impacted by the conflict in determining what their needs for the processes are. The above “next steps” were co-developed with those engaged in the conflict and among members of each “side”. Further, a good process will leave the substantive issues to the participants in the process. As such, the above next steps are largely process-focused, and once the multi-party process is established, substantive issues will be determined by the participants and those communities and groups they represent.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Local AP Community

Issac Boerema

David Clegg

Wilson Daughtry

Debbie Daughtry

Kelly Davis*

Florian Deltgen

Jett Ferebee

Charles Fletcher

Curtis Fletcher

Gary Fletcher

Marco Gibbs

Denise Gibbs

Rodney Glass

Nick Glasgow

Greg Hamby

Tom Harrison

Tommy Hart

Jake Hodges

Joe Landino

Matt Little

Glenn Lowder

Rob Mann

Buster Manning

Doug Maxwell

Mike Noles

David Rouson

Wes Seegars*

Tammy Shepherd

Jennifer Skvarla Alligood

Ben Simmons

Robert Thompson

Robert Wayne

+ 42 additional AP community members

Red Wolf Advocacy Community

David Busch

Derb Carter

Heather Clarkson

Tim Gestwicki

Will Harlan

Corrine Kendall

Chris Lasher

Karen Lorenzo

Regina Mossotti

Kerri Murphy

Ben Prater

Kat Ramos

Liz Rutledge

Chris Serenari

Aspen Stalls

Ron Sutherland

Danielle Van Aken

Kim Wheeler

+ 17 additional individuals

State Government

Kyle Briggs

Kelly Davis*

Brad Howard

Cameron Ingram

Colleen Olfenbuttel

Sara Schweitzer

Wes Seegers*

Andrea Shipley

James (Chris) Turner

USFWS

Laurel Barnhill

Pete Benjamin

Art Beyer

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Ryan Nordsvan

Mike Oetker

Catherine Phillips

Daffny Pitchford

Taylor Pool

Frank Simms

Wendy Stanton

John Tirpak

Aaron Valenta

Emily Weller

Martha Williams

+ 4 additional individuals

Additional individuals:

Kris Bass

Kristin Brzeski

Bill Edwards

Joey Hinton

Jason Keith

Bridgett M. Von Holdt

Keith Wehner

* Both a local member of the AP community and Commissioner, North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission