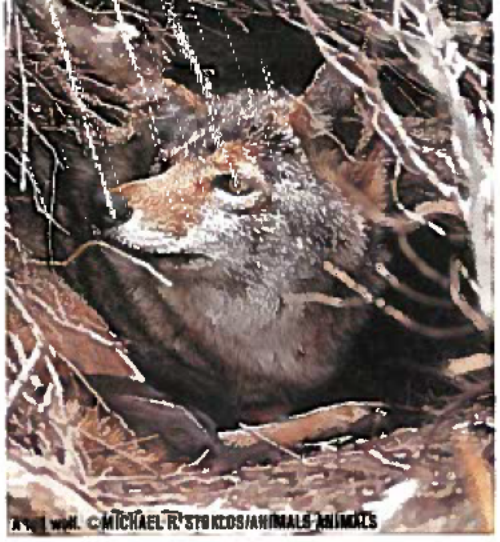

Eastern North Carolina is home to some of the wildest areas left in the eastern United States, and the 113,000-acre Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge is at its heart. This vast wildness provides habitat for several wild populations of the endangered red wolf, which was close to extinction in the 1960s and was subsequently reintroduced here. Eastern North Carolina also hosts the largest concentration of migrating waterfowl on the eastern seaboard, and the refuge's expansive wetlands support 30,000 tundra swans, 20,000 snow geese, 5,000 Canada geese and tens of thousands of ducks.

The Threat

Pocosin Lakes refuge faces the dual looming threats of fighter jets and chickens – developments beyond the refuge's boundary that threaten the wildlife within. An Outer Landing Field (OLF) – located just a mile from the refuge's border – has been proposed to support Navy operations. On top of this OLF, the Navy has proposed designating special-use airspace over Pocosin Lakes and three other refuges. This action would lead to low-level, high-speed flights by military jets. Combined, these two proposals would result in more than 30,000 sorties a year in eastern North Carolina, bringing noise, air pollution and bird strikes to a national wildlife refuge with large concentrations of migratory birds. Defenders and a coalition of other conservation groups recently won a temporary injunction against construction of the OLF. But with the Navy appealing the case, the natural quiet and wildlife of Pocosin Lakes remain in jeopardy.

At the same time, Indiana-based Rose Acre Farms is proposing to build an egg factory adjacent to Pocosin Lakes refuge. The four-million chicken factory would be one of the largest egg-laying operations ever built in the United States, and would have grave impacts on the air and water quality and the environmental integrity of the nearby refuges. Experts estimate that the proposed Rose Acre Farms facility will emit 490 tons of particulate matter per year and an alarming 2,400 pounds of ammonia per day. The facility could transmit diseases to rare and endangered birds and other wildlife in the area. The facility will increase trucking and could potentially require substantial road construction and improvements, further threatening water quality and fragmenting this important habitat. Failing to learn its lesson from the huge pollution problems caused by factory hog farms in the area, the state recently issued a draft permit for the chicken facility, claiming there would be no discharge of pollution into the neighboring streams and wetlands.

The Solution

The Navy must select an environmentally preferable alternative site for its proposed landing field and special use airspace. Responsible agencies should carefully scrutinize the Rose Acre project with the goals of preventing air and water pollution and averting the spread of diseases to birds in the wild.

Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge — North Carolina

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