



May 15, 2020

The Honorable Elaine L. Chao, Secretary
United States Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, S.E.
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Secretary Chao:

Please accept this letter of support from The Wilderness Society for the North Carolina Department of Transportation's (NCDOT's) application *Continuing Corridor K: Connecting People, Goods, and Services* to the U.S. Department of Transportation's BUILD Program. This project is the outcome of extensive coordination between government agencies, local officials, and environmental stakeholders to ensure a project that meets the local and broader needs for reliability and connectivity, while maintaining environmental sensitivity.

Graham County, where this project is located, relies on a few main roads for transportation into and out of the county. These roads are located in mountainous terrain and are often susceptible to heavy rain, wintery weather, and landslides. Through our involvement in this project we are convinced that the project will improve connectivity for local and commercial traffic that brings goods and services into and out of the county as well as long-distance travel that moves through the county. Improvement in transportation infrastructure is crucial for residents who must travel out of the county for jobs, healthcare, and other critical services, as well as for visitors coming into the county and commercial traffic which must use these roads to transport goods in and out of this part of North Carolina as well as move through this area. These improvements will bring about economic benefits for a rural county with serious challenges for its workforce. Fiber optic cable is in short supply in this area. The proposal to bring in fiber optic cables along the proposed route will not only enable effective signaling to improve traffic flow and efficiently accommodate disruptions to highway routes. It will also boost the economic conditions of Graham County by increasing its broadband internet infrastructure. The improved highway and technological infrastructure are both a critical need for Graham County.

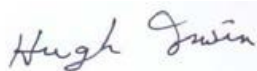
The Wilderness Society is the leading conservation organization working to protect wilderness and inspire Americans to care for wild places. Founded in 1935, and with more than one million members and supporters, The Wilderness Society is committed to the ideal that wilderness and all public lands can bring people and communities together and that everyone should share equitably in their benefits. True to our history, we are guided by science, learning and adapting to create enduring solutions for future generations. While dedicated to protecting wild places, The Wilderness Society recognizes the crucial role of transportation and economic infrastructure to local communities and the nation. We think that smart development can protect environmental resources while improving quality of life. Graham County has exceptional wildland resources that make it a destination for tourism, recreation, and renewal for our

members as well as many other citizens. We are convinced that these resources can be conserved while also providing good transportation to and through Graham County. We have been involved with A-0009C planning for over a decade to help bring a balance between providing good transportation and economic infrastructure while also conserving Graham County's exceptional conservation resources. It has been a pleasure to work with NCDOT and their consultants to provide feedback to thoughtful design so that the A-0009C project can move forward while meeting both of these goals.

The Wilderness Society supports the NCDOT current plans to improve the existing right of way, rather than create a new route that would inevitably degrade some of Graham County's most remote and pristine lands. Adding passing lanes to increase safety and enhance travel speeds along the existing route is a smart approach to improving transportation infrastructure while limiting impact on priority conservation lands. This will also solve transportation problems in a shorter timeframe and with much less controversy than creating new routes. Bringing in fiber optics along the route will also address the inevitable disruptions that occur with highways in mountainous terrain. The proposed fiber optics system will allow signaling and traffic control to enable better adaptation and resilience to traffic disruptions. The increased broadband access to Graham County would also leverage increased economic opportunities in the county. This is the right mix of highway improvement with smart technology that will make the highway system more resilient and adaptable while also boosting the economy of the county and preserving wildland areas important for tourism. We strongly support this smart and balanced approach.

For these reasons, we strongly urge you to support the **Corridor K Improvements** (STIP Project No. A-0009C) and the NCDOT's application *Continuing Corridor K: Connecting People, Goods, and Services* for federal BUILD grant funding to accelerate its construction.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Hugh Irwin". The signature is written in dark ink on a light-colored background.

Hugh Irwin
Landscape Conservation Planner
The Wilderness Society
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