



August 7, 2023

United States Department of Transportation
Federal Highway Administration
1200 New Jersey Avenue, S.E.
Washington DC 20590

RE: NCDOT WILDLIFE CROSSINGS PILOT PROGRAM 2023 GRANT APPLICATION I-26 UNITE

Dear Grant Selection Committee Members:

Please accept this letter from the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) in support of the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) 2023 **I-26 UNITE** grant application for funding under the United States Department of Transportation's Wildlife Crossings Pilot Program.

With the rapid expansion of roads and development in western NC and eastern TN many opportunities to preserve functional wildlife corridors that connect them are being lost. Along the 9-mile stretch of I-26 identified in **I-26 UNITE**, these opportunities are still viable, but with 8,000 to 10,000 vehicles a day (and rising), and with more development encroaching, the window for proactive measures and straightforward solutions is closing.

Since March 2022 NPCA has been conducting research along Interstate 26—including the 9 miles in this grant application—from Exit 9 in Madison County, North Carolina to Exit 50 in Unicoi County, Tennessee. This section includes the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, a national park unit that straddles the state boundary and crosses under the highway at Sam's Gap. Portions of this stretch are also bounded by the Pisgah and Cherokee National Forests. Our mission with this work is to improve wildlife's ability to safely cross I-26 that will result in improved public safety, and that will restore wildlife habitat connectivity across this nationally significant landscape. We have employed a multi-faceted research approach to 1) assess wildlife vehicle collision patterns through historic data curation and current driving surveys using local citizen science 2) assess wildlife activity within and beyond the forested highway right-of-way through wildlife camera trapping 3) assess permeability of existing structures, including those described in the grant, through wildlife camera trapping.

We believe the new wildlife fencing and reconfiguration proposed in this grant application would substantially improve use of existing structures and markedly decrease wildlife vehicle collisions. It is a major step toward restoring functional wildlife pathways in this region. Further,

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it would lay the foundation to tie in/enhance future highway wildlife connectivity projects that may be proposed once our research is complete; measures that may include bridge abutment slope benching and recontouring, riprap remediation, culvert daylighting, and installation of wildlife friendly median barriers, all of which would further enhance the value of the fencing.

We are excited to support **I-26 UNITE** and other efforts by NCDOT as they seek long-term solutions to reduce wildlife vehicle collisions and ensure healthy wildlife flow across the Southern Appalachians.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light gray background, which appears to read "Jeff Hunter".

Jeff Hunter
Southern Appalachian Director
National Parks Conservation Association
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