



09/03/2024

Marissa Cox
NC Department of Transportation
Environmental Policy Unit
1598 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, NC 27699

Dear Ms. Cox,

I am writing today to express National Parks Conservation Association's (NPCA) unwavering support for NCDOT's grant application to FHWA's Wildlife Crossings Pilot Program related to I-26 in Madison County, North Carolina. This application seeks funding to install 6.5 miles of wildlife fencing to direct wildlife, especially large mammals, to existing wildlife crossing structures.

National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) is the leading voice for our national parks - an independent, nongovernmental, nonpartisan organization that works to protect and enhance our national parks. Through a nationwide network of offices and with more than 1.6 million members and supporters (including 30,216 members and supporters in Tennessee, and 47,218 members and supporters in North Carolina), we speak up for the more than 430 landscapes, seashores, cultural and historic places that make up our national park system and the ecological and human communities that support them.

In 2022 and 2023, NPCA conducted 2 years of research on a 14-mile stretch of Interstate 26 in Madison County, North Carolina and Unicoi County, Tennessee. That includes 9-miles of highway in North Carolina from exit 9 (Burnsville) to the NC/TN state line at Sam's Gap. NPCA's primary nexus of interest in the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, a 2197-mile footpath from Georgia to Maine. The trail crosses beneath I-26 at Sam's Gap. In addition to serving as a recreational resource, the trail is an important climate corridor for wildlife movement.

Our research involved placing wildlife cameras in the highway right-of-way to identify wildlife encroaching on the highway. We also conducted weekly driving surveys to look for animal carcasses. Our focal species were Black Bear and White-tailed Deer.

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One of our first observations was the fencing associated with (2) wildlife underpasses in North Carolina is mis-aligned. Instead of flaring out parallel to the roadway to funnel wildlife to these structures, the fencing is currently functioning as an enclosure, or barrier to wildlife using these structures.

While our cameras did observe use of these structures by a variety of species, including our target species, use of the structures could be significantly improved by re-aligning the wildlife fencing to funnel animals to cross beneath the roadway. This will result in both reduced wildlife mortality and improved safety for motorists.

In closing, I want to make you aware that we have a Safe passage display at the I-26 North Carolina Welcome Center in Madison County. This is allowing us to educate and engage with the motoring public about our wildlife research on the I-26 corridor in Western North Carolina.

Respectfully,

Jeffrey Hunter

Southern Appalachian Director
National Parks Conservation Association

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