



The I-40 Pigeon River Gorge  
Wildlife Crossing Project

Wildlands Network  
14 O'Henry Street, Suite 306A  
Asheville, NC 28806

August 4, 2023  
US Department of Transportation  
Federal Highway Administration  
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE  
Washington, DC 20590

To Grant Selection Committee Members:

The Safe Passage Coalition is pleased to express their support of the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) in coordination with the Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT) joint grant application, submitted in response to the Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) for the United States Department of Transportation's (USDOT) Wildlife Crossings Pilot Program (WCPP) under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL). We understand that projects will be evaluated by USDOT using selection criteria that prioritize improving safety, climate change and sustainability, equity, workforce development, job quality, and wealth creation.

In Western North Carolina and Eastern Tennessee, a group of stakeholders came together to form the Safe Passage Coalition that combines local, state, tribal, and federal agencies, land managers, conservation organizations, nonprofit park partners and other invested community members who are working specifically in the region of Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

In June 2022, Wildlands Network and the National Parks Conservation Association released their official report, "Road Ecology Research and Mitigation Strategies to Improve Wildlife Connectivity and Human Safety along I-40 in the Pigeon River Gorge." One of the largest road ecology research projects ever completed in the eastern United States, the 86-page report provides 20 detailed mitigation recommendations for improvements to existing structures or the creation of new structures along Interstate 40 in the Pigeon River Gorge where wildlife mitigation engineering will reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions.

NCDOT and TDOT are very supportive of these efforts and have exhibited interest in pursuing funding. Protecting wildlife from roadway collisions is critical for our region's infrastructure, motorist safety, natural ecosystems, and quality of life.

Studies indicate that this stretch of roadway winding through the narrow, mountainous, gorge sees over 28,500 vehicles per day, and that figure will only increase as our population grows and tourism continues to bring visitors to NC and TN.

Therefore, the Safe Passage Coalition supports this application for the Wildlife Crossing Pilot Program for \$1,800,000 to fund a feasibility study for the identified locations in need of mitigation on Interstate 40 through the Pigeon River Gorge.

Thank you for the opportunity for our organizations to work cooperatively.

Respectfully,  
Nikki Robinson, North Carolina Project Manager  
Wildlands Network

And the undersigned:

Ben Prater, Southeast Program Director  
Defenders of Wildlife

Carl Silverstein, Executive Director  
Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy

Jeff Hunter, Southern Appalachian Director  
National Parks Conservation Association

Mike LaVoie, Natural Resource Director  
Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians

Manley Fuller, Vice President Conservation Policy  
North Carolina Wildlife Federation

Laurel Rematore, Chief Executive Officer  
Great Smoky Mountains Association

Bill Holman, NC State Director  
The Conservation Fund

Liz Hillard, Senior Wildlife Biologist  
Wildlands Network

Laura Early, Eastern Program Manager  
SouthWings

Dan Gibbs, Black Bear Program Coordinator  
Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency

Michael R. Pelton, Professor Emeritus, Wildlife Sciences  
University of Tennessee, School of Natural Resources

Terry McGuire, Principal  
McGuire Consulting - Expertise and Experience in Design and  
Construction of Wildlife Highway Mitigation Measures

Lindsay Gardner, Associate Director, Policy Research/Development & Federal Relations  
Tennessee Wildlife Federation