



September 3, 2024

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

Dear Federal Highway Administration Representatives,

The Safe Passage Fund Coalition (SPFC) is comprised of seven nonprofit organizations united to make it possible for the public to donate in support of improving wildlife connectivity and human safety in Western North Carolina. We believe it is possible to balance the needs of the rich biodiversity that inhabits our mountain region with the ever-growing human population.

Western North Carolina is home to large tracts of protected, public lands including the 522,427-acre Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and the Pisgah and Cherokee National Forests to the northeast (512,758 and 650,000 acres, respectively). These forests are home to a growing and dispersing elk population, a large and robust black bear population, white-tailed deer, and many other species of mammals, reptiles, amphibians, birds, and other taxa. Under current climate change predictions, the nationally significant habitat network formed by the National Park and National Forests will be critical for the long-term health northward flow of regional plants and animals.

The Safe Passage Fund Coalition has been actively engaging the invested public to draw attention to this urgent conservation matter. Through our communications and outreach, we have raised \$210,320 to support this work.

We are pleased to express our support of the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT)'s proposal for the following projects:

I-40 Haywood County: Groundhog Creek Area Wildlife Passage: In 2022, Wildlands Network and the National Parks Conservation Association published "[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. This study aimed to identify locations with high incidents of wildlife-vehicle



collisions, monitor wildlife activity rates along the roadside, and evaluate roadway permeability by monitoring black bear, white-tailed deer, and elk. The results from this study show that black bear movement was highest at the Groundhog Creek culverts and the I-40 westbound tunnel that facilitates movement as an overpass structure but lacks directional fencing. Therefore, we support NCDOT's efforts to improve safe passage at Groundhog Creek and the tunnel as an excellent location to continue addressing these wildlife connectivity issues throughout the broader area of the Pigeon River Gorge.

I-26 Madison County: Wildlife Fence Installation for Wildlife Crossings and Roadway Safety: In 2022 and 2023, National Parks Conservation Association conducted two years of research on a 9-mile stretch of Interstate 26 in North Carolina. The evidence-based work resulted in recommendations that include adding directional fencing to existing wildlife underpass structures in that corridor.

We look forward to advancing our cause with the support of the Wildlife Crossing Pilot Program. Thank you for the opportunity for our organizations to work cooperatively.

Respectfully,

The Safe Passage Fund Coalition

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