



United States Department of the Interior



FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Asheville Field Office
160 Zillicoa Street Suite B
Asheville, North Carolina 28801

August 29, 2024

FHWA WILDLIFE CROSSINGS PILOT PROGRAM
2024 GRANT APPLICATION
USFWS ASHEVILLE FIELD OFFICE (AFO) LETTER OF SUPPORT FOR NCDOT

RE: The [Wildlife Crossings Pilot Program | FHWA \(dot.gov\)](#) competitive grant program awarding grants to eligible entities for projects with the goal of reducing Wildlife Vehicle Collisions (WVC) while improving habitat connectivity for terrestrial and aquatic species.

In support of NCDOT's ongoing and longstanding coordination, incorporation and construction of wildlife crossings on transportation facilities in North Carolina, and their joint Wildlife Stewardship [MOU](#) with the NC Wildlife Resource Commission, this letter serves as the USFWS AFO's support for the following proposed NCDOT projects:

I-26 Madison County: Wildlife Fence Installation for Wildlife Crossings and Roadway Safety -

This project proposes to install 6.5 miles of appropriately designed wildlife fencing to direct species, especially large mammals, to the existing wildlife crossing structures. The fencing would minimize highway access while directing wildlife to the underpasses and the Big Laurel Creek bridge.

I-40 Haywood County: Groundhog Creek Area Wildlife Passage Structures – This project seeks to install wildlife underpasses at Groundhog Creek as well as 2.2 miles of wildlife fencing to bracket the multiple hydraulic structures under I-40 near and Groundhog Creek. The fence will extend to the I-40 westbound tunnel, thereby incorporating the proposed passage improvements with an existing overpass that is used by wildlife. This will create a mix of wildlife crossing opportunities within a section of the Pigeon River Gorge.

The two projects below fall within the USFWS Raleigh Field Office (RFO) work area. Acknowledging that, and the RFO's stated support, the AFO provides additional support given the impacts to endangered red wolves (*Canis rufus*).

US 64 Washington County: Wildlife Fencing to Reduce Wildlife Vehicle Collisions (64 SAFETY) –

This project proposes to upgrade the existing wildlife underpasses with appropriate wildlife fencing for approximately 7 miles of US 64. The fencing will reduce WVC in an area with critically endangered red wolf, black bear, and white-tailed deer populations and improve habitat connectivity for all species within this corridor.

US 64 Dare County: The Red Wolf Essential Survival Crossings Under Evacuation Route

(RESCUER) - RESCUER proposes to reduce WVC and improve habitat connectivity for the entire length of US 64 within the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge (ARNWR). This project is critical for the continued existence of the only wild population of the critically endangered Red Wolf in the world. This project is a joint application with the USFWS's Red Wolf Recovery Program and ARNWR. It is supported by Wildlands Network, the Center for Biological Diversity, and coalition partners through a \$2 million fundraising challenge to match a \$2 million anonymous donor. More information can be found [here](#).

Over the last 10 years vehicle strike mortalities have been the leading cause of mortality in Red Wolves. Installing wildlife fencing to reduce WVC along with multiple wildlife underpass structures to provide habitat connectivity for species including the critically endangered Red Wolf, black bear, white-tailed deer, meso-mammals, small mammals, and herpetofauna is an essential mitigation measure to address impacts from US 64 through ARNWR. Specific to this funding opportunity, this first phase addresses one of the WVC hotspots and is a main area of concern along US 64 identified by both Huijser and Begley (2023) based on all Red Wolf vehicle strike mortality data and previous WVC studies conducted on US 64.

The USFWS AFO appreciates the efforts that the NCDOT is making toward reducing WVCs across the state. Such projects align with the USFWS mission, that is “Working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.” We appreciate the opportunity to provide our support.

Sincerely,

Holland Youngman
USFWS Wildlife Biologist
NCDOT Liaison