



# United States Department of the Interior

## FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Coastal North Carolina National Wildlife Refuges Complex

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August 8, 2023

The Honorable Pete Buttigieg  
Secretary of Transportation  
US Department of Transportation  
1200 New Jersey Avenue, S.E.  
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Secretary Buttigieg:

Please accept this letter of support for the Solving Access for NC 12 in Dare County (**SAND**, or “the Project”) application to the USDOT’s 2023 PROTECT Grant program. This collaborative project, spearheaded by the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) with support from project partners US Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and National Park Service, will undertake a Planning and Environmental Linkages (PEL) study. This study will establish a solid foundation for a streamlined National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, permitting, and construction, with the goal of securing the long-term resiliency of NC 12 in the Outer Banks of North Carolina.

SAND is requesting PROTECT funding to perform comprehensive resiliency planning, alternatives development and evaluation, and extensive public and stakeholder engagement for an 11-mile section of NC 12 between Oregon Inlet and Rodanthe in Dare County, North Carolina. This stretch of NC 12 is vital to the safety, quality of life, and economy of the Outer Banks. It is a critical lifeline connecting residents, tourists, and property owners in Hatteras Island to the rest of Dare County and mainland North Carolina. Moreover, it traverses areas with substantial ecological and recreational value in the Cape Hatteras National Seashore (Seashore) and Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) which provide recreational opportunities, while conserving a diverse array of habitats that support migratory waterfowl and endangered species like the loggerhead sea turtle.

Storms, ocean currents, and wave and wind action are continually and dynamically reshaping the low-lying barrier islands that NC 12 traverses. Rising sea levels, coupled with the increasing severity and frequency of coastal storms are accelerating the impacts of these forces, leading to flooding, shoreline erosion, and sand and ocean overwash that damages the roadway and causes extensive repair and cleanup costs. Since 2010, NCDOT has spent more than \$72 million to keep NC 12 south of Oregon Inlet passable following storm events. These persistent challenges disrupt the lives of residents and visitors, negatively impact the Seashore and the Refuge and lead to negative impacts on the regional economy.

To address these concerns, SAND will build upon prior decision-making and environmental analyses for phases I, IIa, and IIb of State Transportation Improvement Program project B-2500 and the efforts of the NC 12 Task Force to identify the range of reasonable alternatives for subsequent NEPA evaluation and support the identification of a preferred alternative. The Project will perform environmental screening and develop conceptual roadway and structure design for these alternatives, including preliminary hydraulic modeling, to understand their cost, constructability, and environmental impacts. Resiliency and mitigation planning will also be a key focus, and the Project will identify opportunities to incorporate innovative strategies such as oyster reef restoration and nature-based solutions for stormwater management. SAND will also identify permitting and resource needs required for successful implementation. Robust public and stakeholder engagement will occur throughout the project, ensuring that all diverse perspectives are considered in the decision-making process. These project elements will address vulnerabilities at projected future breach locations as well as the Canal Zone and Pea Island Visitor Center Hot Spots. At these locations, rising tides are breaching dunes, and sand and ocean overwash are a major challenge during and after coastal storms.

The Refuge is a small barrier island at the north end of Hatteras Island which, though small in size, is very popular among wildlife and people. Established in 1938 and managed by the Service, a primary mission of the Refuge is to provide nesting, resting, and wintering habitat for migratory birds, including the greater snow geese and other migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, wading birds, raptors, and neotropical migrants, as well as to provide habitat and protection for endangered and threatened species, such as loggerhead sea turtles. Another purpose of the Refuge is to provide opportunities for the public enjoyment of wildlife and wildland resources, offering visitors the opportunity to experience spectacular flocks of ducks, swans, and other waterfowl, and explore dynamic beaches and dunes.

For decades now, the Service has enjoyed a cooperative and productive relationship with NCDOT on related projects along the Refuge to provide solutions to the disruptions to NC Highway 12 on the Refuge. The Refuge feels this Project will continue to accomplish this goal in ways that not only reduce threats to vulnerable wildlife environments and allow portions of the Refuge to function as a more natural barrier island, but also retain public access and availability while ensuring the health and safety of visitors thus contributing to the purpose and mission of the Refuge itself.

SAND will bring together Federal and state agencies, local communities, academia, and advocacy groups to build a common framework for decision-making and advance the development of long-term solutions to enhance the resilience of this critical transportation link. Thank you for your consideration of the SAND grant application for funding through the PROTECT program.

Sincerely,



Rebekah Martin  
Project Leader, Coastal North Carolina  
National Wildlife Refuge Complex