



29 May 2018

Ahmad Al-Sharawneh, Project Manager
1548 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, NC 27699-1548

Dear Mr. Al-Sharawneh,

The NC Chapter of The Wildlife Society (NCTWS) respectfully asks that you protect the Sandy Bottom Preserve by creating an elevated spanned road for wildlife passage. As discussed further below, an elevated spanned road would reduce wildlife mortalities and reconnect the historical floodplain between Sandy Bottom and the French Broad River. It would also increase human safety by reducing accidents caused by flooding and vehicle collisions with wildlife.

NCTWS is the professional society for wildlife biologists and managers in North Carolina, with over 250 members representing dozens of federal, state, and local agencies, universities, and non-governmental organizations. As part of our mission, NCTWS “strives to be an acknowledged source of current scientific information and expertise, and acts as a collective voice on matters relating to wildlife biology, management, education, and policy.”

The Sandy Bottom Preserve and Registered Heritage Area is a highly valued, local and regional treasure with extraordinary biodiversity. Researched since the 1970s, it is one of the most unique wetland complexes in the state and Southern Appalachian region and represents spring-fed wetland, Appalachian bog, floodplain, vernal pool, and natural community and habitat types. These types of wetlands are disappearing and are increasingly rare in Western North Carolina, especially in the greater Asheville area due to development and road building.

The Sandy Bottom area is irreplaceable and one-of-a-kind. It has more reptile and amphibian species than any one location in the state or in the region and arguably in the nation (as many as 4 Orders, 15 Families, 30 Genera, and over 40 Species). Rare and/or state-listed reptile and amphibians at the site include Bog Turtle, Mole Salamander, Four-toed Salamander, and in the French Broad River and lower Bent Creek also in the project zone, Eastern Hellbender and Eastern Spiny Softshell.

Rare habitats for amphibian breeding include fishless, vernal, seasonal, or semi-permanent pools and spring-fed bogs with sphagnum moss essential for the Four-toed Salamander and the Bog Turtle. For these sensitive habitats to remain viable and functioning, it is critical to protect and maintain proper hydrological function, including surface flow, into the pools and underground springs in the bogs.



The site complex is also habitat for the state's largest known colony of federally endangered Gray Bats and refugia and corridor habitat for a number of game species such as Black Bear, Wild Turkey, and White-tailed Deer. Sandy Bottom provides cover, forage, nesting habitat, and space for animals to disperse, helping steer wildlife away from Highway 191, thereby reducing vehicle-wildlife collisions and providing a buffer for adjacent Blue Ridge Parkway and Pisgah National Forest lands.

With regard to overall wildlife benefits and habitat use at Sandy Bottom, it is vital to incorporate wildlife passage under an elevated spanned road system designed for this project. Wildlife passage will help alleviate wildlife road mortalities and will reconnect the historical floodplain between Sandy Bottom and the French Broad River. An elevated spanned road would have greater integrity as it would not be subject to frequent flooding, which occurs on the current road. If a non-elevated multi-lane road were built, it also would be subject to frequent flooding, resulting in increased costs to maintain the road. In addition, an elevated spanned road would increase human safety by reducing vehicle-wildlife collisions and reduce flooding-related vehicle accidents.

Lastly, if the entire section of NC 191 from NC 146 to north of the Blue Ridge Parkway (2.6 miles) cannot be elevated due to funding constraints, the NCTWS recommends elevating the majority of the section, particularly at the southern and northern end of the Sandy Bottom Complex, to reduce road mortalities of wildlife, including the state-listed Mole Salamander.

Please do not hesitate to contact me for any follow-up questions or discussion.

Sincerely,

Colleen Olfenbittel
President, NC Chapter of The Wildlife Society
Certified Wildlife Biologist®