



STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

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GOVERNOR

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SECRETARY

DATE: July 15, 2026

TO: Aquatic Habitat Committee Participants

FROM: NCDOT-Environmental Analysis Unit -Biological Surveys Group (EAU-BSG)

SUBJECT: Aquatic Habitat Committee Roles and Responsibilities for Cane River Re-establishment Collaboration; NCDOT Hurricane Helene Permanent Repairs, Yancey County; NCDOT WBS Nos. 18313.1100997, -998, & -999; FWS Service Log Nos. 25-130 and -131 and 25-165 and -166.

US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) issued a Biological and Conference Opinion (B/CO) for "Repair Portions of U.S. Highway 19 West – North & South Sections and Portions of Intersecting Roadways Damaged by Tropical Storm Helene in Yancey County, North Carolina" (Service Log #25-130, 25-131) on March 20, 2026 and for "Repair Portions of N.C. Highway 197 South & North Sections and Portions of Intersecting Roadways Damaged by Tropical Storm Helene in Mitchell and Yancey Counties, North Carolina" (Service Log #25-165, 25-166) on June 11, 2026.

NCDOT and FWS agreed to the following aquatic conservation measures (CMs) among others:

"Aquatic CM4 – River Re-establishment Collaboration" – The following will be implemented:

1. River re-establishment plans will be adjustable for areas prioritized for Appalachian elktoe habitat restoration. During the planning process for river re-establishment and Appalachian elktoe habitat restoration areas, NCDOT, their designated river re-establishment consultant(s), and other associated contractors, as appropriate, will work collaboratively with designees from the Service and NCWRC on the details and features of the habitat areas. This group will function as an aquatic habitat committee; will include experts in riverine hydraulics/geomorphology, river re-establishment engineering, and aquatic species biology; and will exist for the duration of the [US 19 and] NC 197 projects.

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2. Where possible, native bed material for priority habitat areas will be included and identified in project designs. Other appropriate borrow material may be used if native bed material is unavailable.
3. NCDOT will include, as part of its oversight, experienced river re-establishment personnel to ensure construction of the habitat restoration areas is performed as directed.”

NCDOT’s consultants are preparing river re-establishment plans for three Hurricane Helene Permanent Repair corridors in Yancey County that will involve the Cane River:

- NC 197 South (WBS 18313.1100997)
- US 19W South (WBS 18313.1100998)
- US 19W North (WBS 18313.1100999)

NC 197 North (Toe-Nolichucky) (WBS 18313.1100996) does not involve river re-establishment work.

Aquatic Habitat Committee

As documented in the referenced B/COs, NCDOT will implement CMs to further the recovery of the Appalachian elktoe and Eastern hellbender. The beneficial effects of measures were considered in FWS’s determination of whether the projects will jeopardize the species under consideration. As noted, the Aquatic Habitat Committee (AHC) is a requirement of Aquatic CM 4 of the NC 197 B/CO and Aquatic CM 4 of the US 19 B/CO.

Purpose

The purpose of the AHC is to discuss and explore opportunities to integrate river and aquatic habitat re-establishment into the US 19 and NC 197S Hurricane Helene Permanent Repair activities. The intention of the AHC is resolve questions and/or concerns prior to the river re-establishment plans being finalized for Ready For Construction (RFC) plans.

Participants

The AHC will include the following people with expertise in riverine hydraulics/geomorphology, river re-establishment engineering, and aquatic species biology:

Participant	Agency/Representing	Role/Expertise
Tyler Stanton	NCDOT-EAU-BSG Leader	ESA, Section 7 Consultation, Biologist
Jared Gray	NCDOT-EAU-BSG, Aquatic Team Lead	ESA, Section 7 Consultation, Aquatic Biologist
Marissa Cox	NCDOT-EPU, Western Regional Team Lead	NEPA, ESA, Section 7 Consultation,
Michael Turchy	NCDOT-EAU-ECAP Group Leader	Sec. 404/401 Permitting, NEPA
Mike Sanderson	NCDOT-Division 13 Environmental Program Supervisor	ESA, Section 7 Consultation, Biologist

Matt Lauffer	NCDOT State Hydraulics Engineer	Riverine hydraulics/geomorphology
David Johnson	NCDOT-EAU, Mitigation Group	Riverine hydraulics/geomorphology, river restoration engineer
Mark Endries	USFWS-AFO Biologist, NCDOT Liaison	ESA, Section 7 Consultation
Holland Youngman	USFWS-AFO Biologist, NCDOT Liaison	ESA, Section 7 Consultation
Jay Mays	USFWS-AFO Recovery Biologist	ESA, aquatic species, aquatic habitat restoration, Section 7 Consultation,
Lori Beckwith	USACE Regulatory PM	Sec. 404 Permitting
Luke Etchison	NCWRC Aquatic Conservation Coordinator	Aquatic species, aquatic habitat restoration
Dave McHenry	NCWRC Western Habitat Coordinator, NCDOT Liaison	Wildlife biologist, aquatic species
Amy Annino	NCDWR Environmental Specialist II, 401 and Buffer Transportation Branch	Sec. 401 Permitting, water quality
Grant Ginn	Consultant to NCDOT	River restoration engineer
Dan Christensen	Consultant to NCDOT	Riverine hydraulics/geomorphology
Kat Bukowy	Consultant to NCDOT	Project Management (delivery/coordination), NEPA
Adam Archual	Consultant to NCDOT	Project Management (delivery/coordination), NEPA

The following representatives from NCDOT will be invited as optional attendees (cc'ed): Chris Deyton, Jody Lawrence, John Jamison, Jason Elliott.

Roles and Responsibilities

NCDOT and their consultants are responsible for developing river re-establishment plans. These plans will be drafted and reviewed by qualified river restoration engineers. Following internal review and resolution of comments, NCDOT's consultants will notify NCDOT-BSG that preliminary river re-establishment design plans are available for external review. It is anticipated that these plans will be developed and transmitted in multiple packages.

NCDOT-BSG or NCDOT's consultants (named above) will transmit the plans to the committee via email or a file sharing platform. This transmittal will include a request for availability to attend a plan review meeting approximately three weeks following the transmittal. If an NCDOT [Interagency and Merger Project Meeting Dates](#) is available within that time frame, it will be included as an option since agency representatives are expected to keep those dates open.

Committee members will review the plans and submit comments or questions to the AHC team within two weeks. This will allow all committee members to review all questions and comments before the meeting to ensure productive discussions occur and resolutions are determined.

The goal of the river re-establishment plan review meeting(s) will be to review and resolve all questions and comments.

NCDOT-EAU-BSG will lead the river re-establishment plan review meeting(s). The anticipated agenda for these meetings will minimally include:

- I. Review river re-establishment design plans, materials
- II. Discuss submitted questions/comments, including possible resolution strategies
- III. Review action items
- IV. Discuss project status and schedule

NCDOT's consultants will generate and circulate meeting summaries for each meeting.

Sincerely,

Tyler Stanton
Biological Survey Group Leader
Environmental Analysis Unit
North Carolina Department of Transportation