

**National Culvert Removal, Replacement, and Restoration Aquatic Organism  
Passage Grant Program  
Fiscal Year 2023**

**For**

**Division 2 Replacement of Structure No. 060256  
On Joe Branch  
Dixon Road  
State Road 1138  
Beaufort County, NC**

**Submitted By:  
North Carolina Department of Transportation**



**February 2023**

## FY 2022 National Culvert Removal, Replacement, and Restoration Grant Program (Culvert AOP Program)

The DOT provides this FY 2022 Culvert AOP Program Application Template to assist project sponsors who intend to apply for a Culvert AOP Program FY 2022 grant. Interested eligible applicants should read the FY 2022 Culvert AOP Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) in its entirety and especially where noted in this application template to submit eligible and competitive applications.

This is a copy of the official Application Template that is found on Grants.gov.

### Basic Project Information

**Basic Project Information** – Provide a narrative for the below items on basic details pertinent to the project, including project name, description, location, involved parties, etc. Items in this section will be used to determine grant program eligibility as detailed in Section C of the NOFO.

1. Project Name	<b>Replacement of Culvert No. 060256 on Joe Branch in Beaufort County, North Carolina to Improve Aquatic Species Passage</b>
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### *Eligibility Criteria*

<p>2. Project Description</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>See Narrative below for further details</b></p>	<p>The culvert replacement project (Project) for which Culvert AOP Program funding is being requested occurs in Beaufort County, which is within the NCDOT Highway Division 2. The project will involve upgrading the culvert to a single box culvert design that will improve AOP. The existing crossing structure over Joe Branch is a double barrel 95” x 67” corrugated metal pipe arch (CMPA) culvert, with a streambed to crown clearance of 10’. Dixon road at the culvert is susceptible to overtopping during a 100 year FEMA flood event, and the culvert accelerates stream velocity at the road crossing.</p> <p>The Project will significantly improve aquatic habitat connectivity to approximately 6,767 linear meters (22201.4 linear feet) in the Joe Branch watershed. Additionally, the replacement structure will increase safety to the public through the reduction of flooding potential and risk of failure.</p>
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<p>3. Which of the following selection priorities does your project meet?</p> <p><b>See Narrative below for further details</b></p>	<p><i>(Check all that apply)</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Anadromous fish listed as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act.</p> <p><b>The Pamlico River that Joe Branch is a tributary of is a designated critical habitat for Atlantic Sturgeon (Unit 2). Potential small, indirect benefits for the Atlantic Sturgeon and Shortnose Sturgeon are outlined in Narrative below.</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Anadromous fish identified by NMFS or USFWS that could reasonably become listed as a Federally endangered species or a threatened species.</p> <p><b>While in 2013 and again in 2019 the NMFS determined that listing of river herring under the endangered species act was “not warranted”, this determination was based in part by the various management and regulatory protective initiatives that are in place. Additionally, the status assessment defined “the foreseeable future” for river herring as 12–18-year time frame (i.e., out to 2030-2036). Thus, it is possible that over this time the conservation and management initiatives prove to not be adequate to offset the various threats to the species. As such, it is very possible that one, or both species of river herring will warrant listing under the ESA in the future. More detailed information on this process is provided in Attachment 2.</b></p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Anadromous fish identified by NMFS or USFWS as prey for endangered species, threatened species, or protected species.</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Anadromous fish identified by NMFS or USFWS as climate resilient stock. See Section H of the NOFO.</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Project that opens up more than 200 meters of upstream habitat for anadromous fish before the end of the natural habitat.</p>
<p>4. Which anadromous species does your project propose to benefit by meaningfully improving or restoring fish passage?</p>	<p><i>Alosa aestivalis</i> - Blueback Herring  <i>Alosa pseudoharengus</i> – Alewife  <i>Morone saxatilis</i> – Striped Bass</p> <p><b>See Narrative below for further details</b></p>
<p>5. Briefly describe how the proposed project benefits the anadromous species in item 4 above?</p>	<p><b>Full description found in Narrative below</b></p>
<p>6. Culvert AOP Program Request amount:</p>	<p>Exact amount in year-of-expenditure dollars: <u>\$720,000.00</u></p>

7. Total Project Cost:	Estimate in year-of-expenditure dollars: <u>\$900,000.00</u>
8. Who is the Project Sponsor?	<p><i>(Name and identify which eligible applicant category applies. Select from the below statutory eligible applicants)</i></p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> State</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Unit of local government</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Indian Tribe</p>
9. If a State or a unit of local government, indicate the percentage, type, and source of non-Federal match.	20% non-Federal matching funds will be provided from NCDOT Division 2 Maintenance funds.

10. Eligible Facility Type:	<p><i>(Identify which eligible structure that the proposed project addresses. Select from the below statutory eligible applicants)</i></p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Culvert</p>
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***Additional Project Information***

11. State(s) and/or tribal land in which the project is located:	Beaufort County, North Carolina
12. If a joint application, please provide organizational names of sub-recipients that will receive funds and other key partners.	N/A
13. Identify the Lead Applicant (who will also be the applicant responsible for administration of Culvert AOP Program funds if application is selected and the point of contact for the application).	<p>Lead Applicant North Carolina Department of Transportation 1536 Mail Service Center, Raleigh NC, 27699-1536</p> <p>Point of Contact Kevin Bowen, PE, Eastern Deputy Chief Engineer kgbowen@ncdot.gov</p>
14. What are the proposed design standards and specifications for ensuring resulting infrastructure provides for the safety of the traveling public over the service life of that infrastructure?	<p>Culvert and associated roadway design will follow the design practices laid out in NCDOT's <a href="#">Roadway Design Manual</a>, <a href="#">Structures Management Design Manual</a>, and the <a href="#">NCDOT Guidelines for Drainage Studies and Hydraulic Design (2022)</a>.</p> <p>The objective of NCDOT Hydraulic design standards is to provide a 25 Year LOS for SR routes and a 50 Year LOS for NC, US, and Interstate routes, while also considering impacts for the 100 Year event, especially if in FEMA flood zones. If these design standards cannot be met (e.g., existing road overtops in less than the design year and limitations in raising road grade, limitations in structure replacement size due to road grade constraints, etc.) then the desire is to at least maintain existing LOS or improve relative to existing conditions. Preliminary design indicates that the recommended structure for the Joe Branch site reduces backwater effects and reduces velocities while maintaining existing roadway grades.</p>

**Location Information**

<p>A. Location of eligible facility and project area:</p>	<p>SR 1138, Dixon Road, Beaufort County, NC</p>
<p>B. Provide name and description of the waterway and watershed.</p>	<p>Joe Branch is a tributary to Chocowinity Creek in the Tar/Pamlico River Basin. The Tar River originates in Person County NC and consists of a 15,923 square kilometer (km<sup>2</sup>) (6,148 square mile (mi<sup>2</sup>) watershed within North Carolina’s Piedmont and Atlantic Coastal Plain. As the Tar River becomes brackish, it becomes the Pamlico River near the city of Washington, North Carolina. Joe Branch is approximately 5.3 river kilometers (RKM) (3.3 miles (RM)) in length and flows directly into Chocowinity Creek approximately 0.92 RKM (0.57 RM) downstream of the Project. Chocowinity Creek then flows 6.84 RKM (4.25 RM) before reaching the Pamlico River (Chocowinity Bay) southwest of Washington, NC. The drainage area at the Project crossing is 6.47 km<sup>2</sup> (2.5 mi<sup>2</sup>) (Attachment 3).</p> <p>The Joe Branch watershed is reflective of much of North Carolina’s coastal area, with a high percentage of land devoted to agriculture among large swaths of swamps and evergreen forests. The Chocowinity Watershed that Joe Branch is located on is roughly 100 km<sup>2</sup> and is made up of nearly 28% woody wetlands, 24% evergreen forest, 22.3% cultivated crops, with the remainder a mixture of low-density rural development. The Chocowinity Creek and its tributaries have a riparian buffer that is flanked by cultivated agricultural land, with Joe Branch being no exception.</p> <p>On Joe Branch, nearly a third of the watershed upstream of the Project culvert is comprised of woody/herbaceous wetlands, which function to retain and regulate flows from the agricultural areas that flank these wetlands to make up much of the remaining watershed (USGS StreamStats, 2023). Therefore, Joe Branch and its floodplain are essential to safeguard the surrounding areas from flooding, and protect downstream waterways from agricultural runoff.</p> <p>Given that the Atlantic Sturgeon Critical Habitat is located downstream in the Pamlico River, the ability for these smaller watersheds to regulate stormwater runoff is beneficial for the species’ health downstream.</p>
<p>C. Provide Census FIPS codes or other geographic code identifiers for the facility location and project area.</p>	<p>Beaufort County NC Census FIPS Code - 37013</p>

<p>D. Provide geographic coordinates for the project.</p>	<p>35.462, -77.0808</p>
<p>E. Is the project located (entirely or partially) in a Federally designated community development zone?</p>	<p>The project area is not located within a Federally Designated Opportunity Zone, however the nearby Washington NC (approximately 10.8 km) is made up of multiple Opportunity Zones (#37013930400 and #37147000900). These areas use Census information to identify potentially economically disadvantaged areas.</p> <p>The project area is not located within a Federally Designated Empowerment Zone or Promise Zone. However, there are no Designated Empowerment/Promise Zones in North Carolina.</p> <p>The project is located in Block Group 370139310002, with a long-term vacancy rate of 7.37%, and Maximum Poverty/ELI value of 10.38. Chocowinity, the closest town to the project area, has a poverty rate of nearly 37%.</p>

<p>F. Does the eligible project benefit an economically disadvantaged community or an area of persistent poverty? <i>(See Section H of the NOFO – Definitions)</i></p>	<p>The project is situated in Historically Disadvantaged Community Tract ID #9310. Persistent Poverty Tract #9310 also encompasses the project area. This culvert replacement project will provide a box culvert that is less susceptible to failure and provides a safer crossing for travel. Additionally, the upgraded structure will mitigate the risk of flooding for the local population.</p>
<p>G. Are the eligible facility and project area located on Federally recognized Tribal land?</p>	<p><i>(Please select one)</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>The Project area is not located within a FRTL. However, the Pamlico Indian Tribe historically lived along the Pamlico River in Beaufort County. The Pamlico Indian Tribe is not currently recognized on the state or federal level. With that being said, the Pamlico River/Sound are named after this Tribe’s influence on the area.</p>
<p>H. Is the project located in a rural area?</p> <p><i>(See Section H of the NOFO – Definitions)</i></p>	<p><i>(Please select one)</i></p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>The US Census Bureau uses the population threshold of 50,000 as a defined urbanized area. In 2021, Beaufort County had a total population of 44,468, with only 724 people living in Aurora, the closest town to the project area. The largest town in Beaufort County is Washington, which is situated at the mouth of the Tar River, where it becomes the Pamlico River. The county seat of Beaufort County, Washington, has a population of 9,705.</p>

### Project Costs

**Project Costs** – Provide information detailing the costs associated with the project. These costs will be used to determine the eligible award amount, how the project supports financial goals of the program, and other factors. More information on this section can be found in Section D.2.II of the NOFO.

<p>1. Culvert AOP Program Request Amount:</p>	<p>Exact amount in year-of-expenditure dollars: \$ <u>720,000.00</u></p>
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2. Estimated Total of Other Federal funding (excluding Culvert AOP Program request):	Estimate in year-of-expenditure dollars: \$ <u>0.00</u>
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<p>3. Estimated Other Federal funding (excluding Culvert AOP Program) further detail:</p>	<p><i>(List each Federal Program and identify Formula or Discretionary, and the amount for each Federal Program, e.g.:</i>  <i>Program: <u>N/A</u></i>  <i>Amount: <u>\$ 0.00</u></i></p>
<p>4. Estimated non-Federal funding:</p>	<p><i>Source: <u>NCDOT Division 2 Maintenance Funds</u></i>  <i>Amount: <u>\$ 180,000.00</u></i></p>
<p>5. Future Eligible Project Cost (Sum of Culvert AOP Program request, Other Federal Funds, and non-Federal Funds, above):</p>	<p>Estimate in year-of-expenditure dollars: \$ <u>900,000.00</u></p>
<p>6. Previously incurred project costs (if applicable):</p>	
<p>7. Total Project Cost (Sum of 'previous incurred' and 'future eligible')</p>	<p>Estimate in year-of-expenditure dollars: \$ <u>900,000.00</u></p>
<p>8. If more than one culvert or weir, will project bundling be used to deliver the Project?</p>	<p>There are no other identified projects that can be bundled with this project.</p>
<p>9. If proposed project utilizes bundling, Cost of Unbundled Projects</p>	<p>N/A</p>

<p>10. Amount of Future Eligible Costs by Project Type (if applicable):</p>	<p>Project type by structure (if bundling, include the unbundled cost in brackets [\$_])<sup>1</sup> (Ex. Culvert Replacement: \$1,000,000 [\$1,500,000])</p> <p>1. Project Type _____ \$ _____ [\$_]</p> <p>2. Project Type _____ \$ _____ [\$_]</p>
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<sup>1</sup> Costs of unbundled project will be compared with bundled costs to determine potential amount of cost savings and as a factor in the ability to unbundle projects for an award

## Project Selection Criteria

**Project Selection Criteria** – Provide a narrative response on how the project responds to the selection criteria in Section E.1.a of the NOFO. In responding to Project Selection Criteria, refer to statutory selection priorities included in Section E of the NOFO and address them in the appropriate Project Selection Criteria.

<b>Criterion #1: Conservation Benefits to Anadromous Fish</b>	<p>Improving river herring access to potential spawning habitat is consistent with federal and state management initiatives to recover stocks to previous levels and prevent the need to list these species in the future. This improved access is expected to lead to increased reproduction and recruitment; thus, with more individuals being produced with each successive generation, there is a better chance that the local population could withstand some of the negative impacts of climate change into the future. The increased numbers of river herring produced will also increase available food resources for the anadromous Striped Bass.</p> <p>Indirect ecosystem benefits (Criterion 3) may provide indirect benefits to the federally endangered sturgeon species (Atlantic and Shortnose) known to utilize the Pamlico River. As mentioned, the Pamlico River is considered designated habitat for these species, so improvements to tributary waters could benefit the downstream habitat.</p>
<b>Criterion #2: Regional and Watershed Context</b>	<p>The localized improvements to spawning habitat access that will result from the culvert replacement project will benefit Blueback Herring and Alewife stocks in the larger Tar/Pamlico River Basin, as well as the overall South-Atlantic DPS.</p> <p>The Tar/Pamlico River Basin is within the South-Atlantic DPS for river herring. While river herring have close affinities to their natal rivers, there is a certain degree of straying (genetic exchange) between river basins within the overall metapopulations of both species. As such, any localized population improvements, such as those expected as a result of this project will contribute to the overall health of the large metapopulations. The highest amount of straying generally occurs towards the next closest river basin, which in this case is the Albemarle Sound (Roanoke and Chowan River Basins) to the North, and Neuse River to the south. The Albemarle Sound was selected by the NC Wildlife Resources Commission for a pilot river herring stocking program (Potoka, 2021).</p>

<p><b>Criterion #3: Ecosystem Benefits</b></p>	<p>In addition to the localized benefits to the river herring populations in the Pamlico River Basin and the regional benefits to the South-Atlantic DPS metapopulation expected from this project, there are several expected benefits to general ecosystem of the Pamlico River Basin.</p> <p>Overall ecosystem benefits associated with the project include improved habitat connectivity, as well as localized nutrient retention and reduction in flooding effects (See Narrative below, Applicable Selection Priority 3.1).</p> <p>Additionally, increases in river herring numbers as a result of improved access to spawning habitat will benefit species that feed on river herring, most notably the Bald Eagle and Striped Bass (See Attachment 2, Applicable Selection Priority 3.3).</p>
<p><b>Criterion #4: Project Design and Delivery Methods</b></p>	<p>The project will involve upgrading the culvert to a single box culvert design that will improve AOP. The existing crossing structure over Joe Branch is a double barrel 95” x 67” Corrugated Metal Pipe Culvert, with no headwalls, that has a streambed to crown clearance of 10'. Dixon road at the culvert is susceptible to overtopping during a 100-year FEMA flood event, and the culvert accelerates stream velocity at the road crossing. The replacement structure is a single barrel 15'-6" x 7'-3" Alum Box Culvert with headwalls and endwalls. Aluminum box culverts allow for a better fit to natural stream dimensions. The culvert will be buried 1-foot into natural substrate. The Project will significantly improve aquatic habitat connectivity to approximately 6.767 RKM in the Joe Branch watershed. Additionally, the replacement structure will increase safety to the public through the reduction of flooding potential and risk of failure. All necessary roadway, hydraulic, and structural design will follow established NCDOT design guidelines and policies. The project will take place within existing NCDOT right of way. The project will be documented with a CE and should only require general state and federal regulatory permits.</p>
<p><b>Criterion #5: Project Monitoring and Evaluation</b></p>	<p>The NC Wildlife Resource Commission has committed to performing a fish migration barrier assessment at Pembroke Creek before and after culvert replacement.</p> <p>In addition, NCDOT has approached the North Carolina Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit to develop a more extensive research and monitoring plan for this project should</p>

	the grant be awarded.
<p><b>Criterion #6: Climate Change, Sustainability, and Resilience</b></p>	<p>The NCDOT has a <a href="#">Resilience Policy</a> to consider resilience to all disruptions, including those anticipated due to climate change, in all its work practices.</p> <p>The objective of NCDOT Hydraulic design standards is to provide a 25 Year LOS for SR routes and a 50 Year LOS for NC, US, and Interstate routes, while also considering impacts for the 100 Year event, especially if in FEMA flood zones. If these design standards cannot be met (e.g., existing road overtops in less than the design year and limitations in raising road grade, limitations in structure replacement size due to road grade constraints, etc.) then the desire is to at least maintain existing LOS or improve relative to existing conditions. Preliminary design indicates that the recommended structure for the Joe Branch site will reduce backwater effects and reduce hydraulic velocities while maintaining existing roadway grades.</p> <p>Although the NMFS considers river herring as “more vulnerable to climate effects”, the improved access to spawning grounds that will occur as a result of the project, is expected to lead to increased recruitment; thus, with more individuals that are produced with each generation, there is a better chance that overtime the population could withstand some of the negative impacts of climate change (See Attachment 2, Applicable Selection Priority 3.4 for further discussion).</p>
<p><b>Criterion #7: Equity and Barriers of Opportunity</b></p>	<p>The project is expected to benefit river herring, which historically had and continue to have cultural and dietary importance for many Indian Tribes along the Atlantic Coast. As an example of their cultural importance, the Passamaquoddy People in Maine entered into a cooperative restoration effort with USFWS, NOAA, and the ASMFC TEWG to restore the St. Croix Watershed and the once abundant river herring that the communities sustained themselves on for generations. River Herring was a traditional food fish, with evidence of the species’ use as far back as 4,000 years in Passamaquoddy fishing village sites.</p> <p>Members of the Pamlico Band of Skarure and Woccon Indians reside in the portion of North Carolina where the project is located (See Location Information Section G).</p> <p>This project also meets the Opportunity criterion because NCDOT in partnership with its Office of Civil Rights</p>

	actively seeks to certify disadvantaged business enterprises and advertise available opportunities.
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### Project Readiness Criteria

**Project Readiness Criteria**– Submit the requested information in Section E.1.b. for the DOT to conduct a review of the project readiness and environmental review and permitting risk criteria for the project and provide a summary. If the project includes multiple culverts or weirs, indicate the information for each structure included in the application and what impact would occur on the timeframes if the project were unbundled.

1. Environmental Review and Permitting Risk	The project addresses the Environmental Review and Permitting Risk criterion by ...
A. NEPA Status – Indicate if the determination will likely be the result of a Categorical Exclusion (CE), Environmental Assessment (EA), or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).	<p>Planned or Actual Start of NEPA Date: <u>30 days after grant award</u></p> <p>Planned or Actual Completion of NEPA Date: <u>150 days after start</u></p> <p>Final NEPA Determination or current status of NEPA process:</p> <p>The Joe Branch culvert replacement will be classified as a Type I(A) CE action as defined in the Programmatic Agreement between USDOT FHWA NC Office and NCDOT (2019).</p>
B. Will all necessary environmental approvals and permits meet the project delivery timeline specified in the project schedule?	<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <i>(Please provide documentation)</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>The proposed project is expected to be processed as a Programmatic Categorical Exclusion under NEPA guidelines and will require the issuance of an applicable Nationwide Permit by the US Army Corps of Engineers under the Clean Water Act.</p>
C. Are there any prepared environmental studies or documents describing known project impacts and possible mitigation for those impacts?	<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <i>(Please provide documentation, preferably through a website link)</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Any unavoidable stream or wetland impacts that may be associated with the Joe Branch project will be mitigated through NCDOT's MOA with the NC Division of Mitigation Services.</p> <p><a href="https://deq.nc.gov/about/divisions/mitigation-services/about-dms/enabling-legislation">https://deq.nc.gov/about/divisions/mitigation-services/about-dms/enabling-legislation</a></p>

<p>D. Is the project currently programmed in the</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TIP</li> <li>• STIP</li> <li>• MPO Long Range Transportation Plan</li> <li>• State Long Range Transportation Plan</li> </ul>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p><i>(Please specify in which plans the project is currently programmed, the year in which the project is currently programmed and provide the identifying number if applicable)</i></p>
<p>E. Have there been public engagement opportunities?</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <i>(Provide details, including the degree to which public comments and commitments have been integrated into project development and design)</i></p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No</p>
<p>F. Will there be public engagement opportunities?</p>	<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <i>(Please provide details)</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Adjacent property owners will be notified when ground surveys begin. Local law enforcement and school districts will be notified prior to construction.</p>
<p>2. Indicate detailed project schedule, including all major project milestones.</p>	<p>See attachment 3 Actual schedule dates will depend on date of grant award. Scheduling will also be timed so that construction can be performed outside in-water work moratorium for anadromous fish.</p>
<p>3. Is right-of-way acquisition necessary?</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p> <p>If Yes, Planned or Actual Start of Right-of-Way Acquisition Date: _____</p> <p>Planned or Actual Completion of Right-of-Way Acquisition Date: _____</p>

<p>4. Right-of-way acquisition considerations (<i>if applicable</i>):</p>	<p>If right-of-way must be acquired for the project:</p> <p>1. Would right-of-way acquisition require relocation of any people or businesses?</p> <p>No right-of-way acquisition is required for this project</p> <p>2. If Yes, are people or businesses being relocated members of traditionally underserved and underrepresented populations (Environmental Justice communities)? If Yes, please describe.</p>
<p>5. Design Status (<i>if applicable</i>):</p>	<p>Planned or Actual Start of Preliminary Design Date: _____</p> <p>Planned or Actual Completion of Preliminary Design Date: _____</p> <p>Planned or Actual Start of Final Design Date: <u>2/15/2024</u></p> <p>Planned or Actual Completion of Final Design Date: <u>3/15/2024</u></p>
<p>6. Anticipated Construction Start Date (<i>if applicable</i>):</p>	<p>Date: <u>7/1/2024</u></p>
<p>7. Anticipated Project Completion Date (<i>if applicable</i>):</p>	<p>Date: <u>10/30/2024</u></p>
<p>8. Indicate potential project risks and strategies undertaken or that might be taken to mitigate those risks.</p>	<p>The Pembroke Creek project will take place entirely within existing NCDOT right of way. Utility conflicts at the site are minimal and coordination can begin as soon as funding is announced. Culvert material costs and lead times are uncertain. Potential regulatory and permitting concerns have been mitigated through early coordination in the site selection process and designated liaisons within the regulatory agencies will ensure streamlined coordination and timely issuance of permits.</p>
<p>9. The summary on Project Readiness Criteria demonstrates...</p>	<p>NCDOT has both the financial capacity and staff (in-house and/or consultant) capacity to begin the project as soon as funding is announced.</p>

**Narrative**  
**Basic Project Information Sections #1-5**

**1. Project Name**

**Replacement of Culvert (structure # 060256) over Joe Branch on Dixon Road (State Road 1138) in Beaufort County, North Carolina to Improve Aquatic Organism Passage:**

The North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) is requesting \$ 720,000.00 in federal funds through the Culvert Aquatic Organism Passage (AOP) Program under the National Culvert, Replacement and Restoration Grant Program, for the replacement of the existing culvert (structure # 060256) over Joe Branch on State Road (SR) 1138 (Dixon Road) in Beaufort County, North Carolina, to improve aquatic organism passage, particularly for two anadromous fish species, the Alewife (*Alosa pseudoharengus*) and Blueback Herring (*Alosa aestivalis*), collectively referred to as river herring. Another anadromous fish species, the Striped Bass (*Morone saxatilis*) is also expected to benefit from the project by increasing river herring numbers, which are a major food resource for the species.

The NCDOT operates and maintains one of the nation's largest state-maintained highway systems, responsible for maintaining nearly 80,000 miles of roadways and over 18,000 bridges, culverts and pipes. These responsibilities are divided across the state into 14 regions, or highway divisions. The portion of the state immediately along the Atlantic Coastline is covered by three divisions, divisions 1-3 from north to south.

**2. Project Description**

The culvert replacement project (Project) for which Culvert AOP Program funding is being requested occurs in Beaufort County, which is within the NCDOT Highway Division 2. The project is located in North Carolina's south central coastal plain, on a stream that flows to Chocowinity Creek 0.93 river kilometers (RKM)/0.58 river miles (RM) from the subject culvert. Chocowinity Creek then flows 6.84 RKM (4.25 RM) before reaching the Pamlico River, which is a designated anadromous fish spawning areas (AFSA). Chocowinity Creek is also a designated AFSA from a point approximately 7.69 RKM (4.78 RM) downstream from the project location. From the Chocowinity Creek confluence, the Pamlico River flows approximately 46.67 RKM (29.0 RM) before entering the Pamlico Sound near its confluence with the Pungo River. The Albemarle/Pamlico Sound is North Carolina's largest estuary and second largest estuary in the continental United States.

The project will involve upgrading the culvert to a single box culvert design that will improve AOP. The existing crossing structure over Joe Branch is a double barrel 95" x 67" Corrugated Metal Pipe Culvert, with no headwalls, that has a streambed to crown clearance of 10'. Dixon

road at the culvert is susceptible to overtopping during a 100-year FEMA flood event, and the culvert accelerates stream velocity at the road crossing. The replacement structure is a single barrel 15'-6" x 7'-3" Alum Box Culvert with headwalls and endwalls.

The Project will significantly improve aquatic habitat connectivity to approximately 6.767 RKM in the Joe Branch watershed. Additionally, the replacement structure will increase safety to the public through the reduction of flooding potential and risk of failure.

The NCDOT Culvert AOP Program Stakeholders Group (Stakeholders), which consists of representatives from NCDOT, NC Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC), NC Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), has identified various culvert crossing structures in the Highway Divisions 1-3 that pose varying degrees of impediments to aquatic species passage. As such, their respective removals would benefit anadromous fish species, particularly river herring. Potential sites were assigned a priority category of 1 through 3, with Tier 1 being the highest priority. Due to time constraints, the prioritization was primarily a “desktop” evaluation. The structure over Pembroke Creek was assigned a Tier 1 (highest priority) status for structure replacement to eliminate the barrier.

Factors considered in assigning the priority Tier were proximity to a designated AFSA<sup>1</sup> as well as the length of upstream reach that would be opened. As previously mentioned, the closest AFSA is Chocowinity Creek, with the current extent of the designation being 4.87 RM from the subject culvert. An AFSA designation confirms presence of anadromous species; however, areas not identified as AFSA does not mean there is no presence of anadromous species. The closer the proximity to AFSA the higher the site was ranked and secondly the upstream reach length was factored in. A longer upstream reach increased the benefit of structure removal and therefore a higher priority compared to a short reach. Additionally, fisheries biologist from WRC and DMF with experience in the respective watersheds also weighed in on prioritizing several of these sites and to confirm the potential benefit of the crossing improvements.

### **3. Applicable Selection Priorities**

Eight species of anadromous fish known to occur in North Carolina (Table 1). Of the anadromous species listed in Table 1, the two species of river herring, Alewife and Blueback Herring are most likely to experience migration barriers from culverts, as they utilize smaller waterbodies to spawn compared to the other species, and culverts are more likely to occur over smaller waterbodies. Culverts have been identified as potential barriers to aquatic organism passage due to channel constriction, increased slope, unnatural channel bottom, perched outlets and susceptibility to damming and flooding effects caused by trapping debris. In addition to physical barriers to passage associated with culverts, low light levels inside culverts have been demonstrated to impede migration of river herring in North Carolina (Moser and Terra 1999). There also appears to be a relationship with higher flow velocity and turbidity in low light

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<sup>1</sup> Anadromous fish spawning areas are those areas where evidence of spawning of anadromous fishes has been documented by direct observation of spawning, capture of running ripe females, or capture of eggs or early larvae (15A NCAC 10C.0602)

conditions that inhibit upstream migration (Kynard 1993). Peak spawning runs of river herring in North Carolina occur from early March to early May, a time of year where flows of the highest mean river flow.

**Table 1. Anadromous Fish Species of North Carolina**

Scientific Name	Common Name
<i>Acipenser brevirostrum</i>	Shortnose Sturgeon <sup>1</sup>
<i>Acipenser oxyrinchus oxyrinchus</i>	Atlantic Sturgeon <sup>1</sup>
<i>Alosa aestivalis</i>	Blueback Herring
<i>Alosa mediocris</i>	Hickory Shad
<i>Alosa pseudoharengus</i>	Alewife
<i>Alosa sapidissima</i>	American Shad
<i>Morone saxatilis</i>	Striped Bass
<i>Petromyzon marinus</i>	Sea Lamprey <sup>2</sup>

1-Federally and State Endangered.

2- The Sea Lamprey is on the NCWRC freshwater list prioritized for conservation.

Upgrading this culvert to a single culvert with headwalls and endwalls that has a larger opening helps to eliminate the impediment of migrating fish from constricted channels caused by small pipe culverts to migrating fish. The larger opening allows for increased light penetration and less restricted flow within the crossing structure. This not only helps to lower velocities to allow for easier transition for migrating fish, but also lessens the susceptibility for the upstream area to flood during high flow events. The substrate in this case will also be improved, as the culvert will be buried allowing for the natural substrate to be present through the road crossing.

### 3.1 Anadromous fish listed as endangered or threatened

The Atlantic Sturgeon and Shortnose Sturgeon are the only two anadromous fish species protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) that occur in North Carolina. Both species are known to occur within the Tar/Pamlico River Basin. The Pamlico River/Tar River is considered critical habitat for the Atlantic Sturgeon (Carolina DPS Unit 2). While neither species is expected to utilize Joe Branch due to its small size and are thus, unlikely to directly benefit from the culvert replacement project, indirect benefits might occur as a result of the overall ecosystem benefits realized through improved habitat connectivity, as well as localized nutrient retention and reduction in flooding effects. Smaller watersheds like Joe Branch help to process upland pollutants and mitigate flooding events, and these functions can be improved by improving aquatic organism passage and restoring a more naturalized flow regime.

### 3.2 Anadromous fish that could reasonably become Federally listed under the ESA

As mentioned in Attachment 2, Applicable Selection Priority 3.1, the Atlantic Sturgeon and Shortnose Sturgeon, are the only two anadromous fish species in North Carolina protected under the endangered species act. However, stocks of the other anadromous fish species in the state have experienced significant declines compared to historical levels. Causes for the declines have

been attributed to overfishing, habitat degradation, and complete, or partial loss of access to historical spawning habitat by dam and culvert construction.

Harvest moratoria and catch limits have also been enacted on nearly all anadromous species in North Carolina. In addition to the various harvest restrictions, various recovery initiatives have been implemented for river herring. The WRC began a blueback herring stocking program in the Chowan River Basin in 2012 (Potoka and Smith 2021) to determine the effectiveness of that type of program on increasing populations, with the intent that similar programs can then be implemented in other river basins supporting the species.

Because of the declining stocks, the NMFS evaluated whether listing river herring (Blueback Herring and/or Alewife) under the Endangered Species Act was warranted. In 2013 the NMFS issued a “not warranted” determination. However, after a lawsuit challenging this decision, the NMFS initiated a species status review, that led to a revised listing determination, which again led to a “not warranted” determination in 2019. Various existing conservation initiatives and regulatory protections were factored into the decision not to list. However, the status assessment defined “the foreseeable future” for river herring as 12–18-year time frame (*i.e.*, out to 2030-2036), or a three-generation timeframe. Thus, it is possible that over this time period the conservation and management initiatives that are in place or not adequate to offset the various threats to the species, which would necessitate the need for a re-evaluation. As such, it is very possible that one, or both species of river herring will warrant listing under the ESA in the future. More detailed information on this process is provided below.

On August 12, 2013, the NMFS issued a determination that listing was not warranted at that time. However, it was noted that they were committed to revisit the status of both river herring species in “three to five years” as there were significant data deficiencies. A lawsuit was brought against NMFS in February of 2015 challenging this decision not to list the Blueback Herring. As part of a negotiated agreement with the plaintiffs, NMFS committed to publishing a revised listing determination for Blueback Herring by 2019. A status review of both river herring species was then initiated in August 2017 to gather the necessary data on whether listing was warranted. The status review (NMFS 2019) identified four Distinct Population Segments (DPS) for the Alewife (Canada, Northern New England, Southern New England and Mid-Atlantic) and three DPS for Blueback Herring (Canada/Northern New England, Mid-Atlantic, and Southern Atlantic. The Pamlico River Basin is within the Mid-Atlantic DPS for both Alewife and Blueback Herring.

The status assessment used a “likelihood analysis” to evaluate the overall risk of extinction of both species, with a numerical ranking system that corresponded to “very low, low, medium and high” rankings. The range wide level of extinction risk for Alewife was rated as “low”, with each of the DPSs also low. Although the Mid-Atlantic DPS was ranked as low, it was slightly higher than the other DPSs (NMFS 2019). The Blueback Herring likewise had a range wide mean extinction risk score of “low” and “low” in the three DPSs (NMFS 2019).

Based on the level of extinction risks determined in the status assessment, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) issued a determination on June 19, 2019, that listing of the Blueback Herring and Alewife was not warranted at that time (NOAA 2019). The factors that support this determination were the justification supporting this conclusion: “(1) The species are broadly distributed over a large geographic range, with no marine barriers to dispersal; (2) genetic data indicate that populations are not isolated; (3) overfishing is not currently occurring within the range; (4) the population size is sufficient to maintain population viability into the foreseeable future (5) there is no evidence that disease or predation is contributing to increasing the risk of extinction; and (6) there is no evidence that the species is currently suffering from compensatory processes (such as reduced likelihood of finding a mate or mate choice or diminished fertilization and recruitment success) or is at risk of extinction due to environmental variation or anthropogenic perturbations” (NOAA 2019).

While the final determination indicated both Alewife and Blueback Herring populations were at “historical low levels”, NOAA noted that “improved fisheries management efforts in recent years have reduced fishing mortality rates in stocks and that hundreds of habitat improvement projects have been completed in the past 20 years” (NOAA 2019). This was one of the factors why the two river herring species did not meet the definition of either Endangered or Threatened under the ESA. There are several Federal, State, and non-governmental groups that support the ongoing research of the species as well as evaluate and guide the management efforts for the species. One such group, the Atlantic Coast River Herring Collective (River Herring Forum), is supported by NOAA Fisheries and Atlantic States Marine Fisheries (ASMFC) staff to “promote the conservation of the species, support information exchange, and encourage collaboration.” Therefore, although the species are not officially Federally listed, there are monitoring and species augmentation efforts in place to mitigate the ongoing loss of abundance.

While listing of the two river herring species under the ESA is currently not warranted, it is important to note that the status assessment defined “the foreseeable future” for river herring as 12-18-year time frame (*i.e.*, out to 2030-2036), or a three-generation time period. This is due to their species inherent reproductive strategy of high numbers of offspring, with short generation times. Thus, it is possible that over this time the conservation and management initiatives that are in place or not adequate to offset the various threats to the species, which would necessitate the need for a re-evaluation and possible listing.

### 3.3 Anadromous fish identified as prey for endangered, threatened, or protected species

While no longer protected under the ESA, the Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), which is protected under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act and is listed as “Threatened” in North Carolina (NCNHP 2022), occurs throughout the Pamlico River Basin and Pamlico Sound and has been documented to prey on river herring. Restoration of river herring spawning runs in the Sebasticook River in Maine via a combination of dam removal and fish lift installations in the system were shown to boost survival of immature Bald Eagles as it provided an abundant and “seasonably reliable food resource” (DeSorbo et al. 2015). In addition to the Bald Eagle species of wading birds like the Tricolored Heron (*Egretta tricolor*), which is listed as a species of Special Concern in North

Carolina may also benefit from increases in river herring spawning runs in the project area, as over 90% of their diet consists of fish.

River herring are also a major food resource for many predatory fish species, including the anadromous Striped Bass. This species has long been an important commercial and recreational species that has provided economic benefit to states along the Atlantic Coastline, including North Carolina. It was also noted to be a major component of Native Americans diet. Striped Bass stocks have been subject to large fluctuations in numbers particularly since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. Identified reasons for the fluctuations include fishing pressure, environmental pollution, loss and alteration of habitat, inadequacy of fisheries conservation and management practices, and natural causes. In the 1960's there were consecutive years of reproductive failure in the rivers of North Carolina. Due to the risk of potential depletion of the species and its cultural and economic importance, the Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act was passed in 1984, which in conjunction with the Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Management Act of 1993 direct state and federal efforts to manage and protect the species. The project culvert on Joe Branch is located 7.6 RKM (4.72 RM) upstream of a designated Striped Bass Management Area (15A NCAC 03R .0201) on lower Chocowinity Creek near its confluence with the Pamlico River.

### 3.4 Anadromous fish identified as climate resilient stock

The NMFS considers river herring as “more vulnerable to climate effects”. Threats associated with climate change were identified in the status review on river herring (NMFS 2019) and ranked for both species as a whole as well as each DPS. Potential consequences associated with climate change the were considered included changes in amount of preferred marine habitat, due to increased water temperature and changes in water composition, as well as adverse effects to spawning and early life stages due to changes in riverine flow, all of which could result in a contraction of range and increased risk of extinction.

The threats associated with climate change and vulnerability ranked “medium” for Alewife range wide. However, the southern portions of the range were at slightly higher risk than the northern portion (NMFS 2019). Likewise, the Blueback Herring rank was “medium” range wide. Since the Blueback Herring's range occurs further south than the range of the Alewife, the species currently persists in warmer habitats and therefore, may be more resilient to warmer temperatures (NMFS 2019). The “medium” risk determination may suggest that river herring are moderately resilient to the effects of climate change. While improving access to spawning grounds will not in of itself increase resiliency to climate change, increasing spawning access, is expected to lead to increased recruitment; thus, the more individuals that are produced with each generation, there is a better chance that overtime the population could withstand some of the negative impacts of climate change.

### 3.5 Project that opens up more than 200 meters of upstream habitat

As mentioned in the project description, this culvert replacement project will significantly improve access to 6.77 RKM of upstream habitat, which makes up more than half of the entire Joe Branch watershed.

#### **4. Anadromous Species Project Will Benefit**

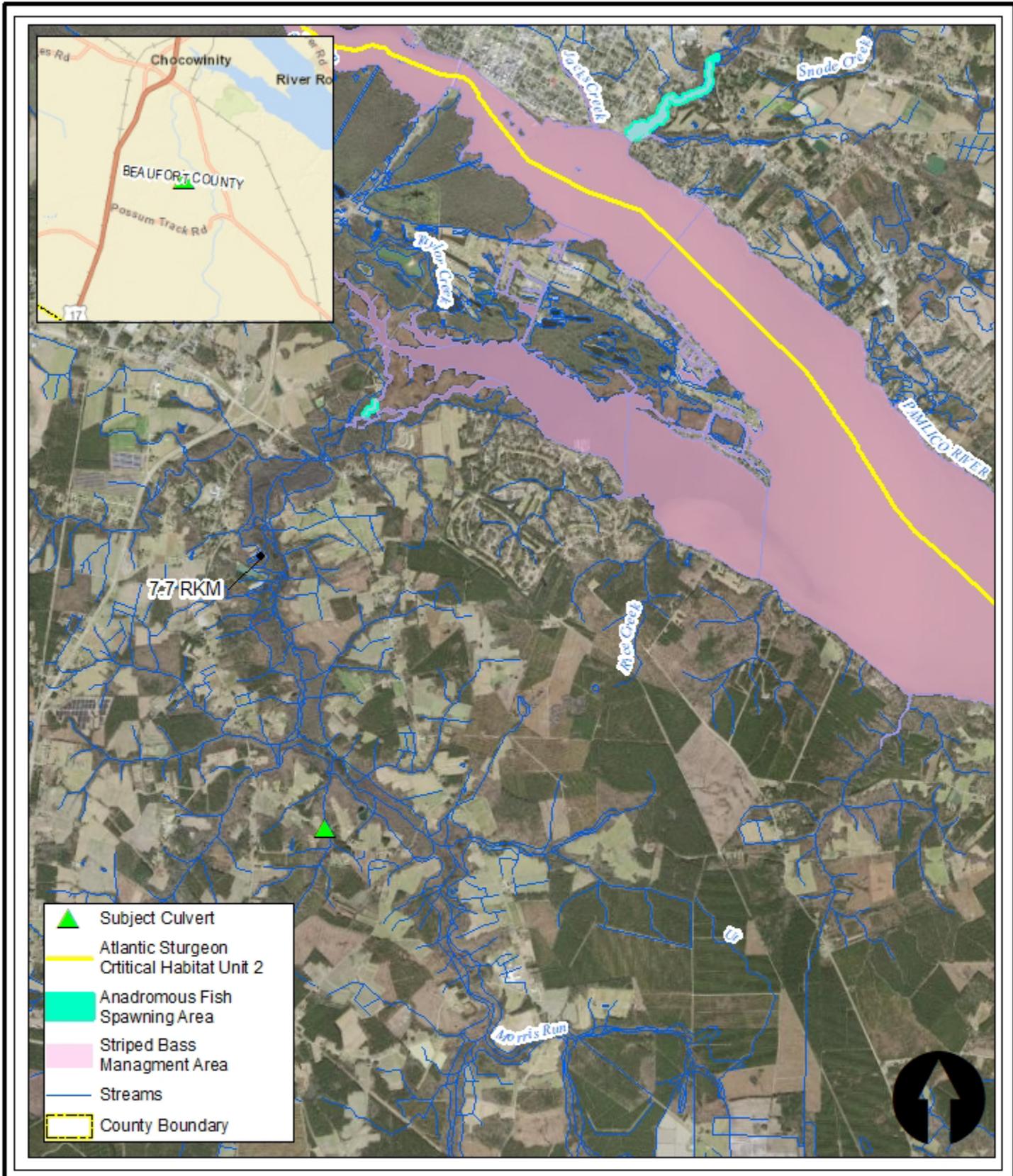
As mentioned, the two river herring species, Alewife and Blueback Herring, and the Striped Bass are most likely to directly benefit from this project's completion. The other anadromous fish species known to occur in the Pamlico River Basin, could indirectly benefit from the project from overall ecosystem benefits.

#### **5. Description of benefits to Anadromous Species**

The culvert replacement over Joe Branch will improve access to 6.767 RKM of potential river herring spawning habitat upstream of the project area. This type of restoration is consistent with federal and state management initiatives to recover stocks to previous levels and prevent the need to list the species in the future.

Additionally, the anadromous Striped Bass population in the Pamlico River Basin will directly benefit from increased food resources (See Narrative, Applicable Selection Priority 3.3). The other anadromous fish species known to occur in the Pamlico River Basin, could indirectly benefit from the project as a result of the overall ecosystem benefits (See narrative, Applicable Selection Priority 3.1).





-  Subject Culvert
-  Atlantic Sturgeon Critical Habitat Unit 2
-  Anadromous Fish Spawning Area
-  Striped Bass Management Area
-  Streams
-  County Boundary



National AOP Grant Program  
 Replacement of Culvert #060256  
 Over Joe Branch  
 On SR 1138 (Dixon Road)  
 Vicinity Map and Nearest AFSA  
 Beaufort County, North Carolina

Date: February 2023  
 Scale: 0 300 600 Meters  
 Job No.: 21-330  
 Drawn By: TDH    Checked By: TWS

Figure  
**1**