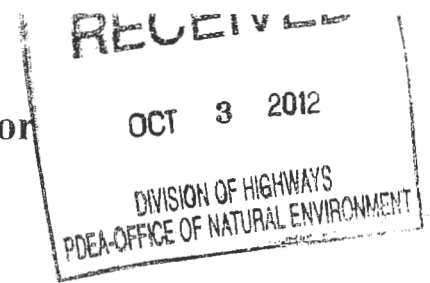




United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Raleigh Field Office
Post Office Box 33726
Raleigh, North Carolina 27636-3726

October 1, 2012



Gregory J. Thorpe, Ph.D.
North Carolina Department of Transportation
Project Development and Environmental Analysis
1598 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, North Carolina 27699-1598

Dear Dr. Thorpe:

This letter is in response to your letter of September 18, 2012 which provided the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) with the biological conclusion of the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) that the replacement of Bridge No. 610228 on SR 1320 (Williamson Street) over Suck Branch in Montgomery County may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect the federally endangered Schweinitz's sunflower (*Helianthus schweinitzii*). In addition, NCDOT has determined that the project will have no effect on the federally endangered red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*) and smooth coneflower (*Echinacea laevigata*). These comments are provided in accordance with Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973, as amended (16 U.S.C. 1531-1543).

According to information provided, a plant survey was conducted at the project site on September 7, 2012. Although no specimens of Schweinitz's sunflower were observed in the study area, there are four known occurrences of the species less than one mile from the project site. Based on the plant survey results and other available information, the Service concurs with your conclusion that the proposed bridge replacement may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect the Schweinitz's sunflower.

During the September 7, 2012 plant survey, no specimens of smooth coneflower were observed. Also, no suitable foraging or nesting habitat occurred within the project area for the red-cockaded woodpecker. Based on the survey results and other available information, the Service concurs with your conclusion that the project will have no effect on the smooth coneflower and red-cockaded woodpecker. We believe that the requirements of Section 7(a)(2) of the ESA have been satisfied. We remind you that obligations under Section 7 consultation must be reconsidered if: (1) new information reveals impacts of this identified action that may affect listed species or critical habitat in a manner not previously considered in this review; (2) this action is subsequently modified in a manner that was not considered in this review; or (3) a new species is listed or critical habitat determined that may be affected by this identified action.

Electronic copy: Ronnie Smith, USACE, Wilmington, NC
Travis Wilson, NCWRC, Creedmoor, NC
Chris Militscher, USEPA, Atlanta, GA