NORTH CAROLINA
Department of Transportation

Inter-agency Update Meeting

NC 143 Improvements

From West Buffalo Creek to NC 143 Business, west of Robbinsville

State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) Project No. R-2822B

November 19, 2026

Connecting people, products and places safely and efficiently with customer focus, accountability and environmental sensitivity to enhance the economy and vitality of North Carolina

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Agenda

- Introductions and Meeting Purpose
- Project Overview
- Project History
- Project Updates
  - Hooper Branch Culvert Replacement / Bridge #13
  - Chickalelee Cemetery
  - Archaeological Site #31GH227
  - Newly Identified Environmentally Sensitive Area
  - T&E Species Survey Updates
  - Snowbird Picnic Area
  - FERC Coordination
- Schedule Review

Introductions

Indian Nations

- Catawba Indian Nation
- Cherokee Nation
- Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians
- Muscogee (Creek) Nation
- United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indian

Resource Agencies

- USACE
- NCDOT
- NCDWR
- USEPA
- USFWS
- NCWRC
- SHPO

NCDOT

- NCDOT Division 14
- NCDOT Environmental Policy Unit
- NCDOT Environmental Analysis Unit
- NCDOT Hydraulics
- NCDOT Structures Management Unit

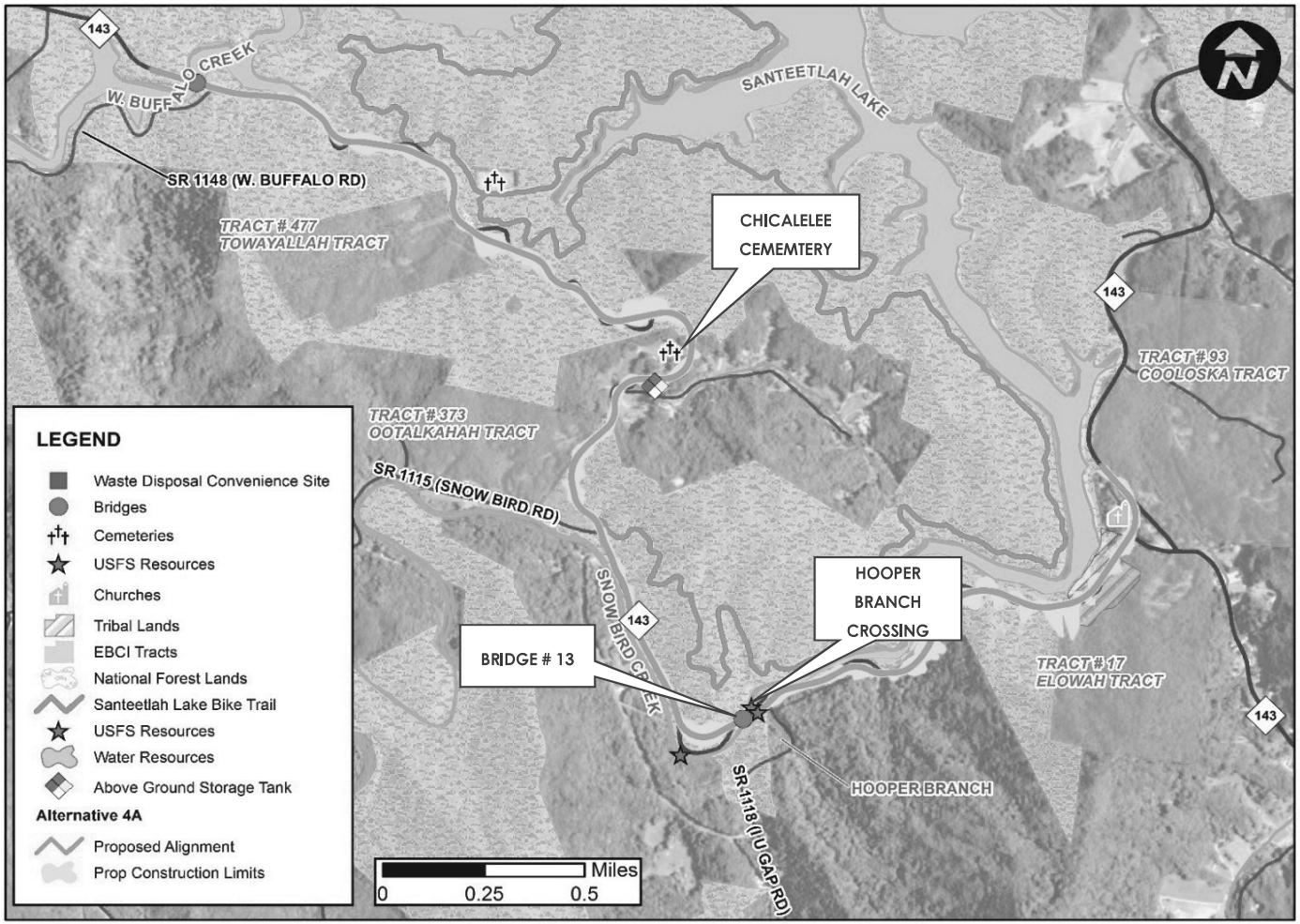
Consultant Team

- Stantec
- STV
- ESC Southeast
- RK&K

Project Overview

Project Overview

- Safety improvements from West Buffalo Creek to NC 143 Business
- Upgrade horizontal and vertical curves to have a minimal design speed of 35-mph
- Widening lanes to 11-feet with 6-foot wide shoulders (4-foot paved)
- Realignment of the NC 143/NC 143 Business Intersection
- Replacement of Bridge #13 over Snowbird Creek using staged construction



NC 143 Improvement Visualizations





Project History

Project History

- 1/23/2007 – Concurrence Point 1 / Study Area Defined
- 12/16/2010 – Concurrence Point 2 – 3 alternatives carried forward including avoidance alternative that included a bridge over Lake Santeetlah.
- 5/8/2013 – Concurrence Point 2A
- 3/25/2015 – Merger Team notified that the project was reprioritized and unfunded
- 7/20/2017 – Merger Team notified that funding was shifted from federal to state. Section 4(f) no longer applicable
    - Alternative 4A using 3-R guidelines introduced
    - USACE recommended revisiting CP 1 and 2/2A
- 3/22/2018 – Concurrence Point 1, 2, and 2A Meeting
    - Retaining existing Bridge #13 recommended
- 11/2018 – Concurrence Point 2A Revisited
    - Replacement of Bridge #13 added to scope
    - USFS requested bottomless culvert at Hooper Branch
- 3/20/2019 – Concurrence Point 3
    - Alternative 4A selected as LEDPA
- 6/19/2019 – Concurrence Point 4A
- 2/19/2021 – Section 106 Effects Meeting
- 3/2022 - Geotechnical studies indicated that a bottomless culvert is not feasible
- 5/2022 – Revisit Concurrence Point 2A/Conduct Concurrence Point 4B
- 6/2022 – State Minimum Criteria Signed
    - Concurrence Point 2A/4B Meeting held
    - USFS prefers an Aquatic Organism Passage culvert solution at Hooper Branch
- 9/2024 – New ESA Identified near the Waste Convenience Site

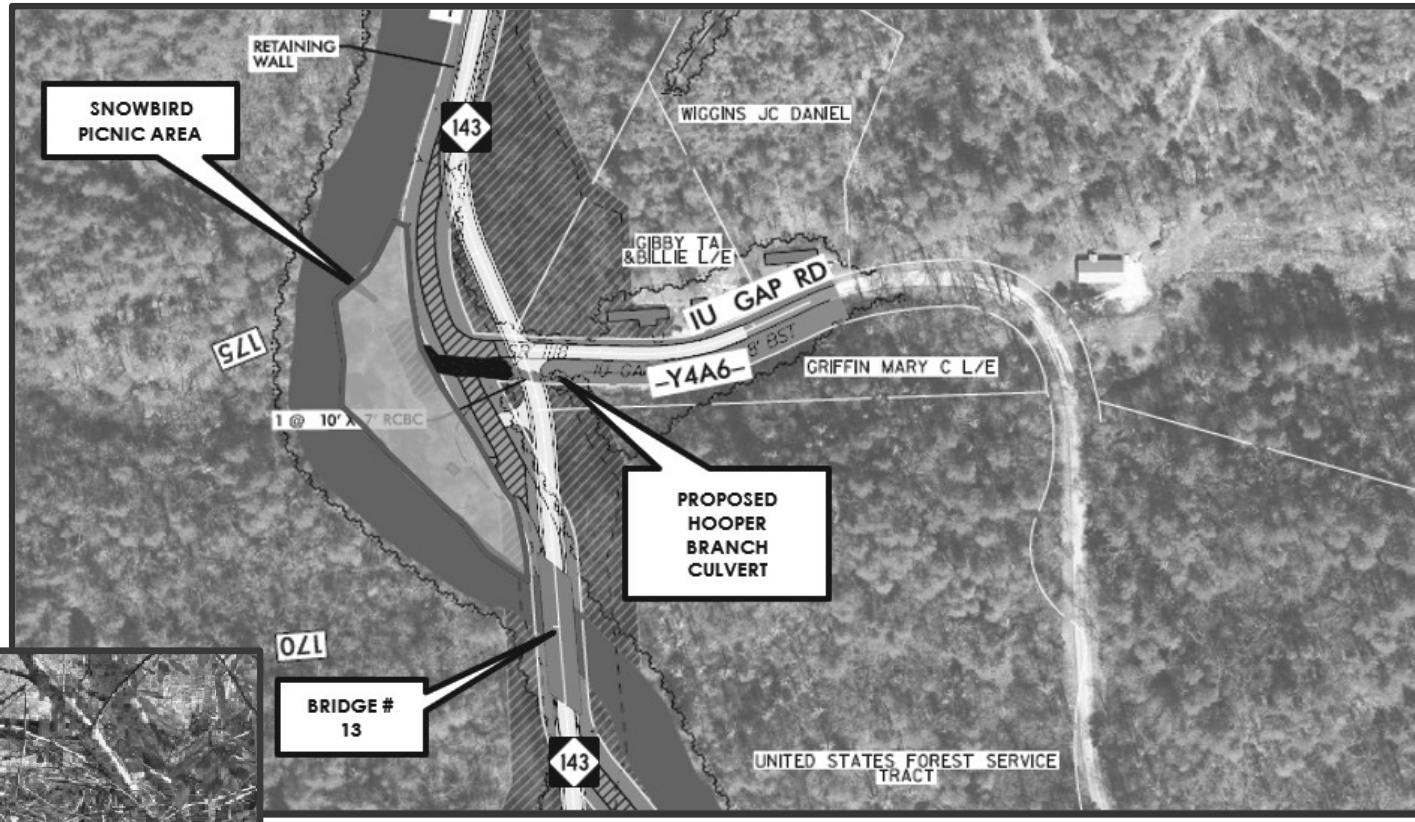
Project History (Continued)

- 5/2025 –Section 106 Coordination Meeting with USACE, EBCI and Cherokee Nation
    - Agreement that the project would have to reopen the Merger Process to address potential Section 106 impacts (newly identified ESA site) before moving into ROW and permitting.
    - USACE to coordinate with Tribes to determine Traditional Cultural Property eligibility for the new ESA site.
- 6/2025 – FERC Coordination Meeting
    - Project likely impacts the FERC boundary at Lake Santeetlah.
    - Additional coordination with Brookfield Smoky Mountain Hydro Power will be required.
    - FERC approval can run up to two years.
- Spring & Summer 2026 – USFS Species of Conservation Concern Surveys completed and validated by USFS.
    - Terrestrial T&E bat surveys completed with no evidence of bats found

Hooper Branch Culvert Replacement / Bridge # 13

Hooper Branch Culvert

- Realignment of NC 143 requires the replacement of the Hooper Branch Culvert.
  - Existing culvert consists of a 48-inch corrugated metal pipe
- During the November 2018 CP 2A Meeting, US Fish and Wildlife Service requested a bottomless hydraulic structure be constructed at the crossing.

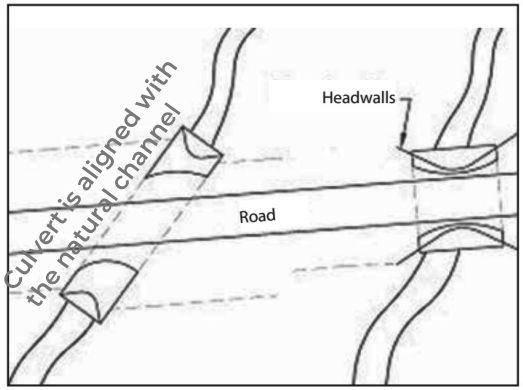


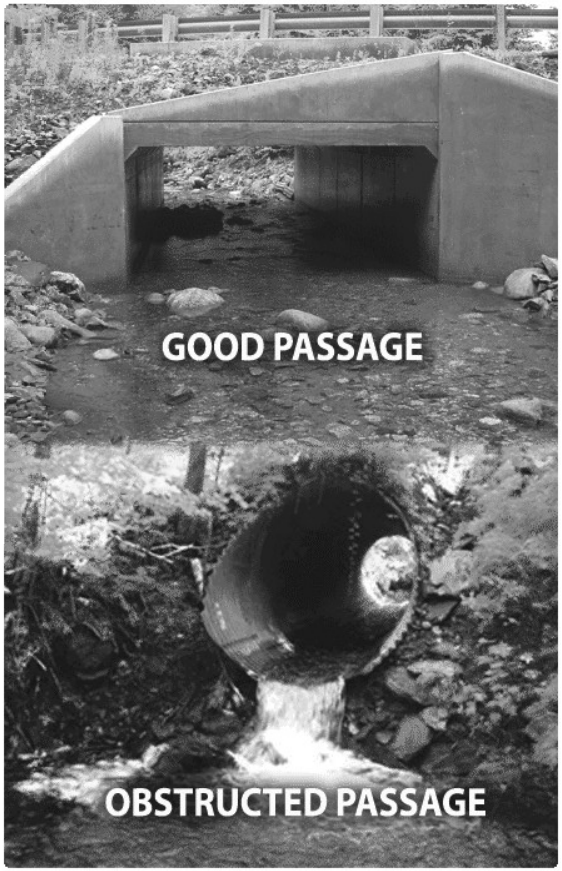


Hooper Branch Culvert

- Geotechnical studies demonstrated that a bottomless hydraulic structure is not feasible due to depth of bedrock.
- USFS preferred culvert solution is an Aquatic Organism Passage (AOP)
- AOP design will extend upstream and downstream of the culvert using natural channel substrate, tying into Snowbird Creek and the realigned channel.
- Intent is to lower the culvert's invert about 2 feet rather than widen the structure, pending field investigation. A bypass may be needed for the 100-year flow.
- USFS approval of AOP design is expected to take 30 days and impacts the project's re-entry into merger.





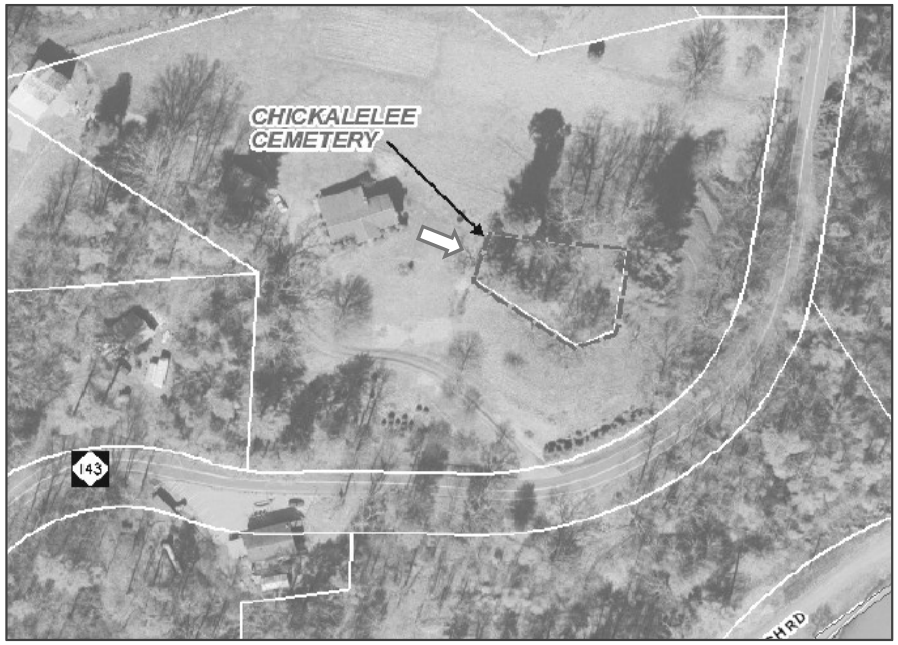


Source: Vermont Stream Crossing Handbook

Cultural Resources

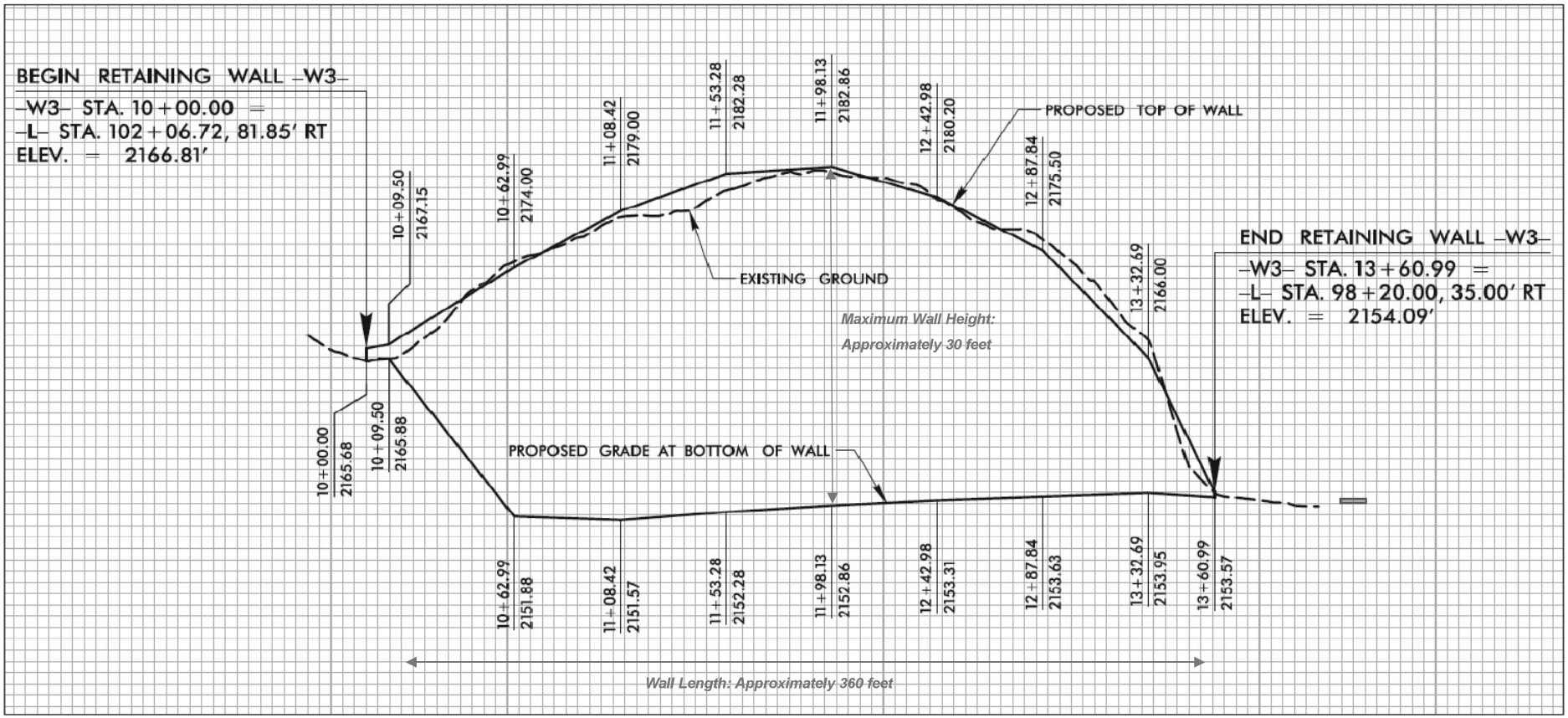
Chickalelee Cemetery

- The Chickalelee Cemetery is located just north of the NC 143/Buchanan Branch Road intersection on a hill overlooking NC 143.
- NC 143 will be realigned to meet a minimum 35-mph design speed in the vicinity of the Chickalelee Cemetery.
- During the **February 19, 2021, Section 106 Effects Meeting**, USACE and SHPO concurred on a No Adverse Effect determination based on the following conditions:
  - Construction of a 385-foot long retaining wall with a maximum height of 25-feet.
  - Archaeological monitoring by and ECBI THPO archaeologist or representative during construction.
  - Addition of an aesthetic façade on the retaining wall.
  - Landscaping plan to determine the type of vegetation that can be planted behind the retaining wall.
  - Staging of construction equipment is restricted at the cemetery site.
- Based on geotechnical studies, the proposed retaining wall will be approximately 360 feet in length with an average heigh of 20 feet; however, the maximum height of the wall is 30 feet.



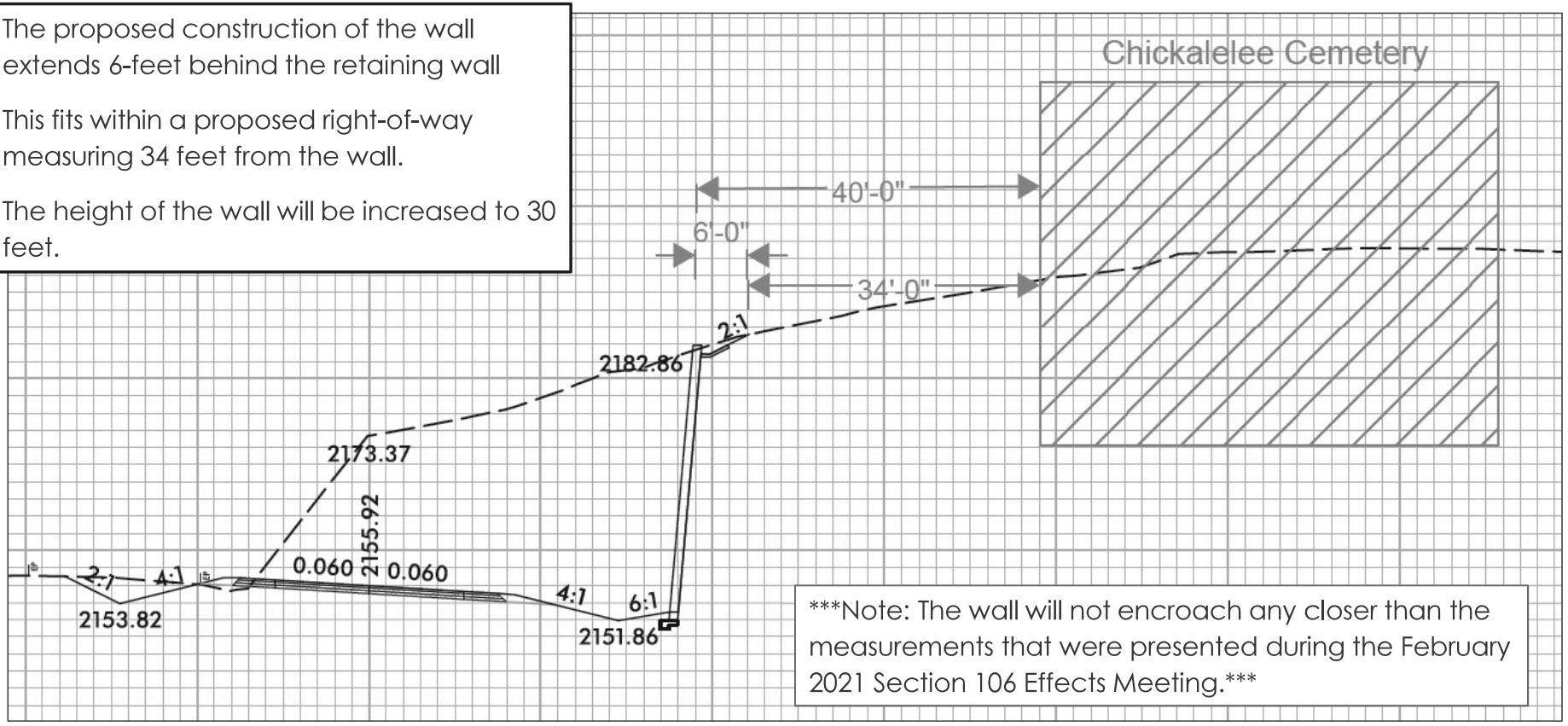
This design modification reopens the Section 106 Process to give the THPOs and the NCSHPO an opportunity to provide input on this change.

Chickalelee Cemetery - Retaining Wall



Chickalelee Cemetery - Retaining Wall

- The proposed construction of the wall extends 6-feet behind the retaining wall
- This fits within a proposed right-of-way measuring 34 feet from the wall.
- The height of the wall will be increased to 30 feet.



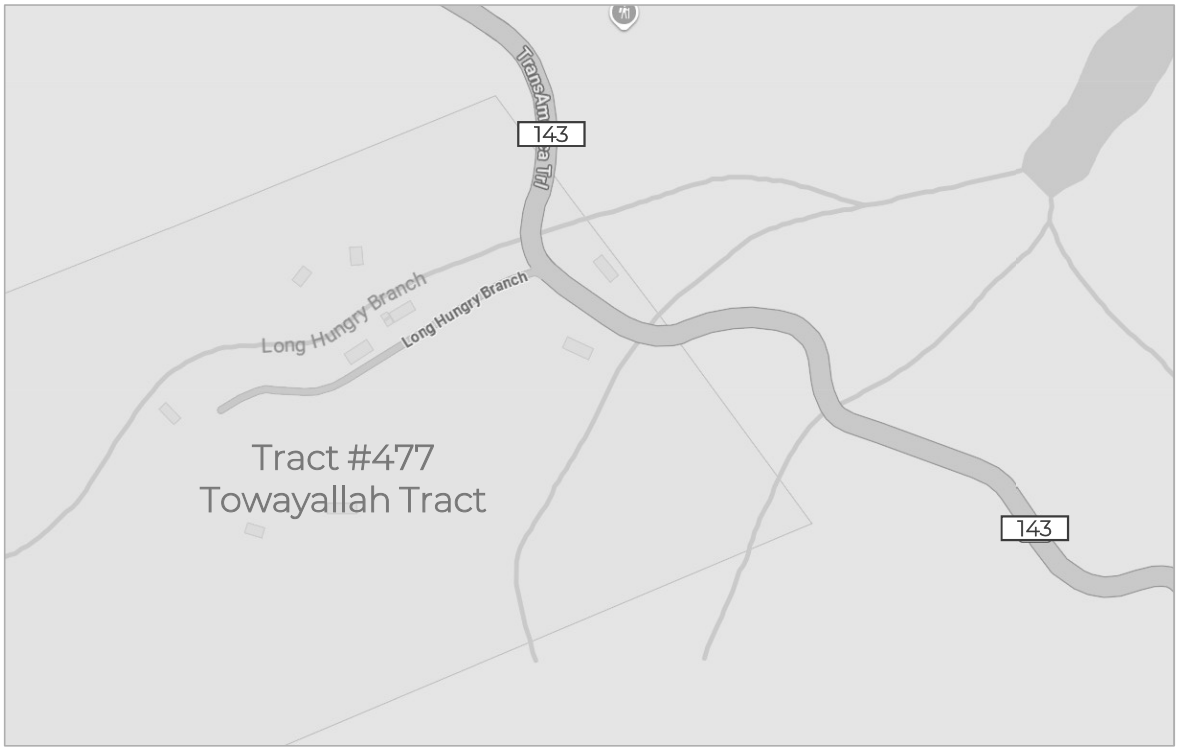
Note: The wall will not encroach any closer than the measurements that were presented during the February 2021 Section 106 Effects Meeting.

Chickalelee Cemetery - Retaining Wall

- The Section 106 Effects determination conditions noted Archaeological monitoring by and ECBI THPO archaeologist or representative during construction.
- NCDOT requests authorization to use an EBCI – approved firm to conduct monitoring during construction.



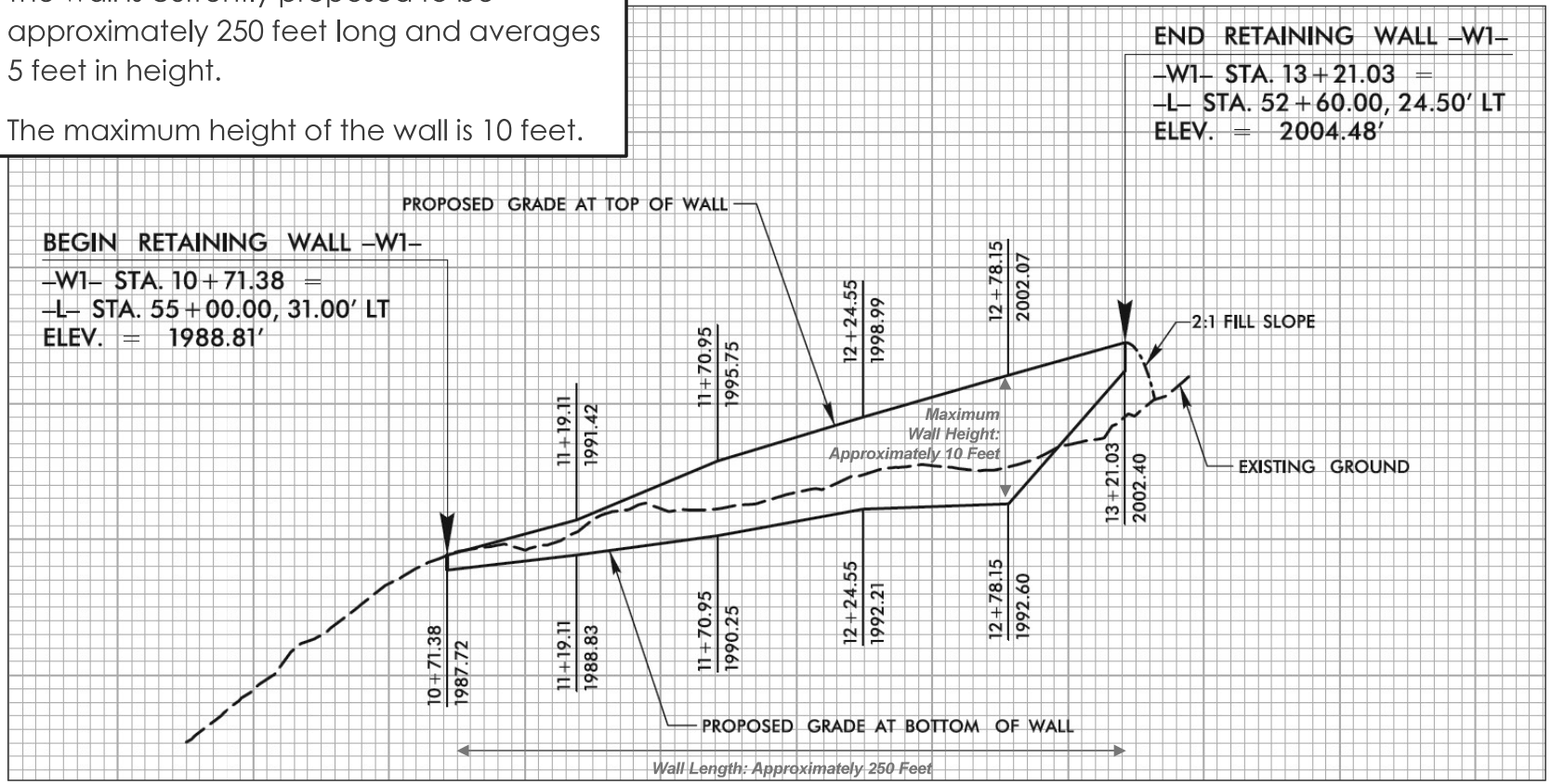
Archaeological Site #31GH227



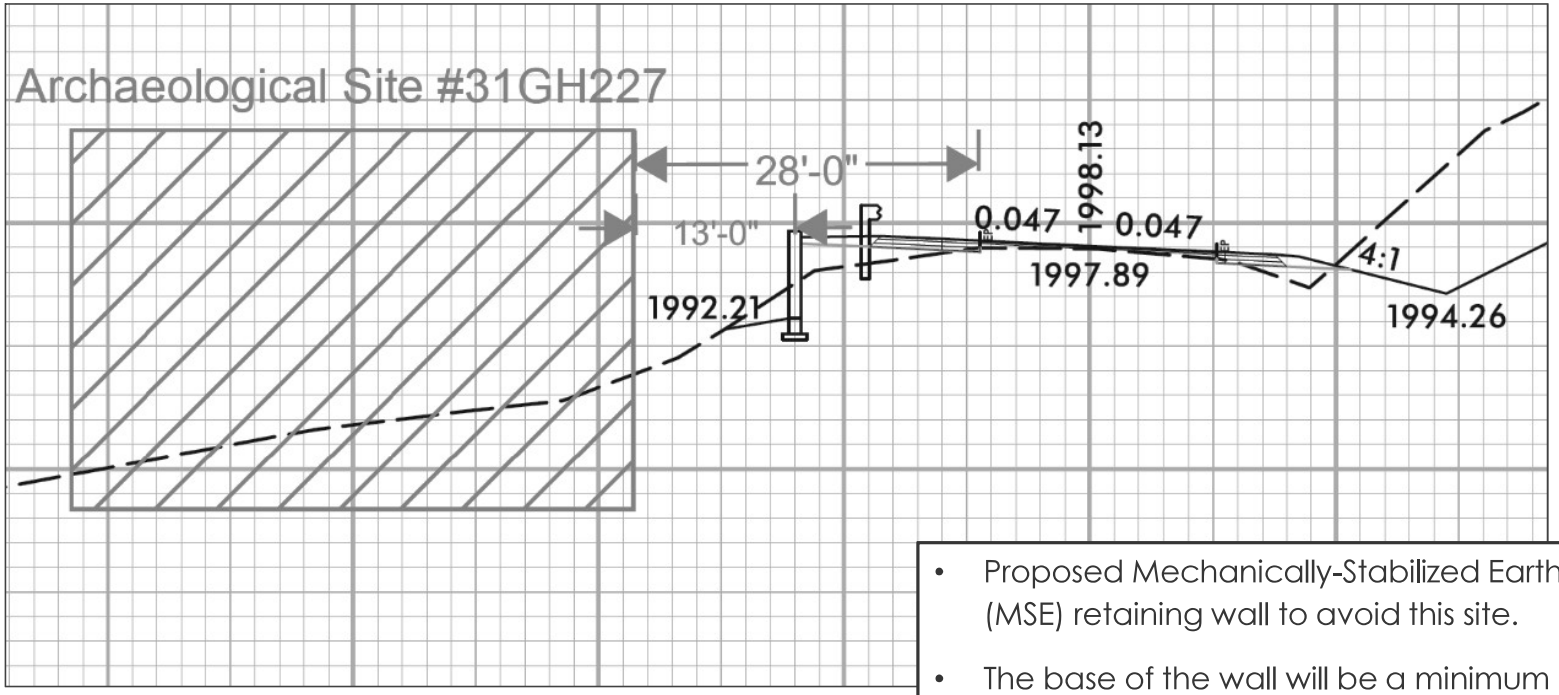
- The archaeological site sits below NC 143 near Long Hungry Branch Road
- The proposed project will include a shored Mechanically Stabilized Earth (MSE) retaining wall to avoid this archaeological site.
- The Archaeological Site will be delineated with an orange safety fence and identified as an Environmentally Sensitive Area in the design plans.

Archaeological Site #31GH227 – Retaining Wall

- The wall is currently proposed to be approximately 250 feet long and averages 5 feet in height.
- The maximum height of the wall is 10 feet.



Archaeological Site #31GH227- Retaining Wall



- Proposed Mechanically-Stabilized Earth (MSE) retaining wall to avoid this site.
- The base of the wall will be a minimum of 13-feet from the archaeological site boundary.

Newly Identified Environmentally Sensitive Area

- In 2024, NCDOT was notified of an ESA near the Waste Convenience Site.
- NC 143 will be realigned in the vicinity of the ESA, requiring additional Section 106 coordination and an Effects Determination.
- Traditional Cultural Property eligibility is pending USACE coordination with the Eastern Band Cherokee Indians (EBCI).
- Coordination required with EBCI and USFS, since the ESA falls on Forest Service land.

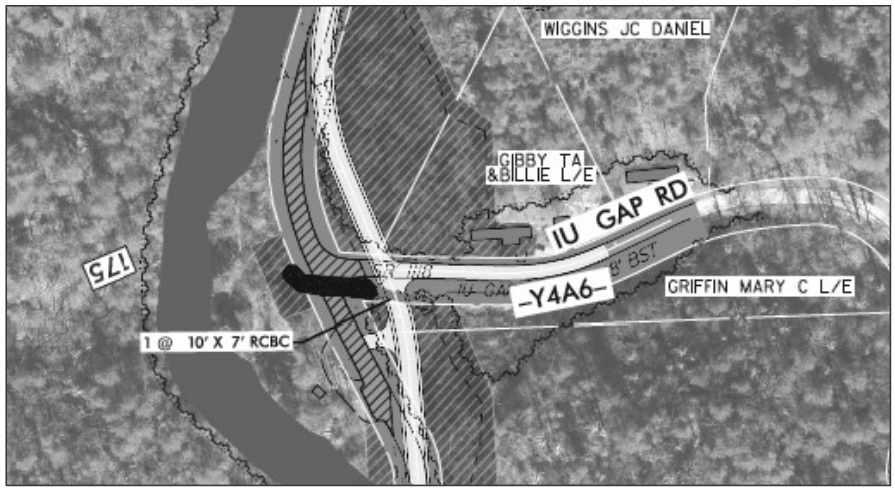
Other Coordination

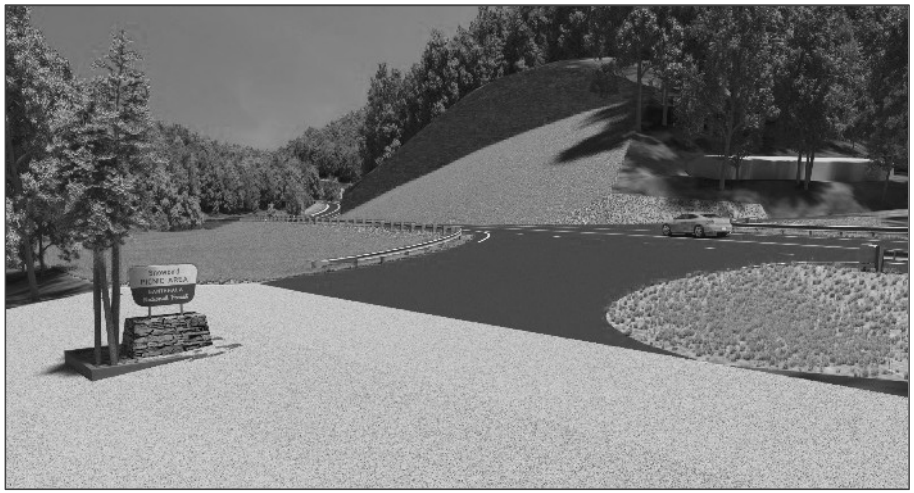
Threatened and Endangered Species

- USFS Species of Conservation Concern Surveys - completed Spring 2026 and validated by USFS.
- Terrestrial T&E bat surveys – Summer 2026 – No evidence of bats was found.

Snowbird Picnic Area

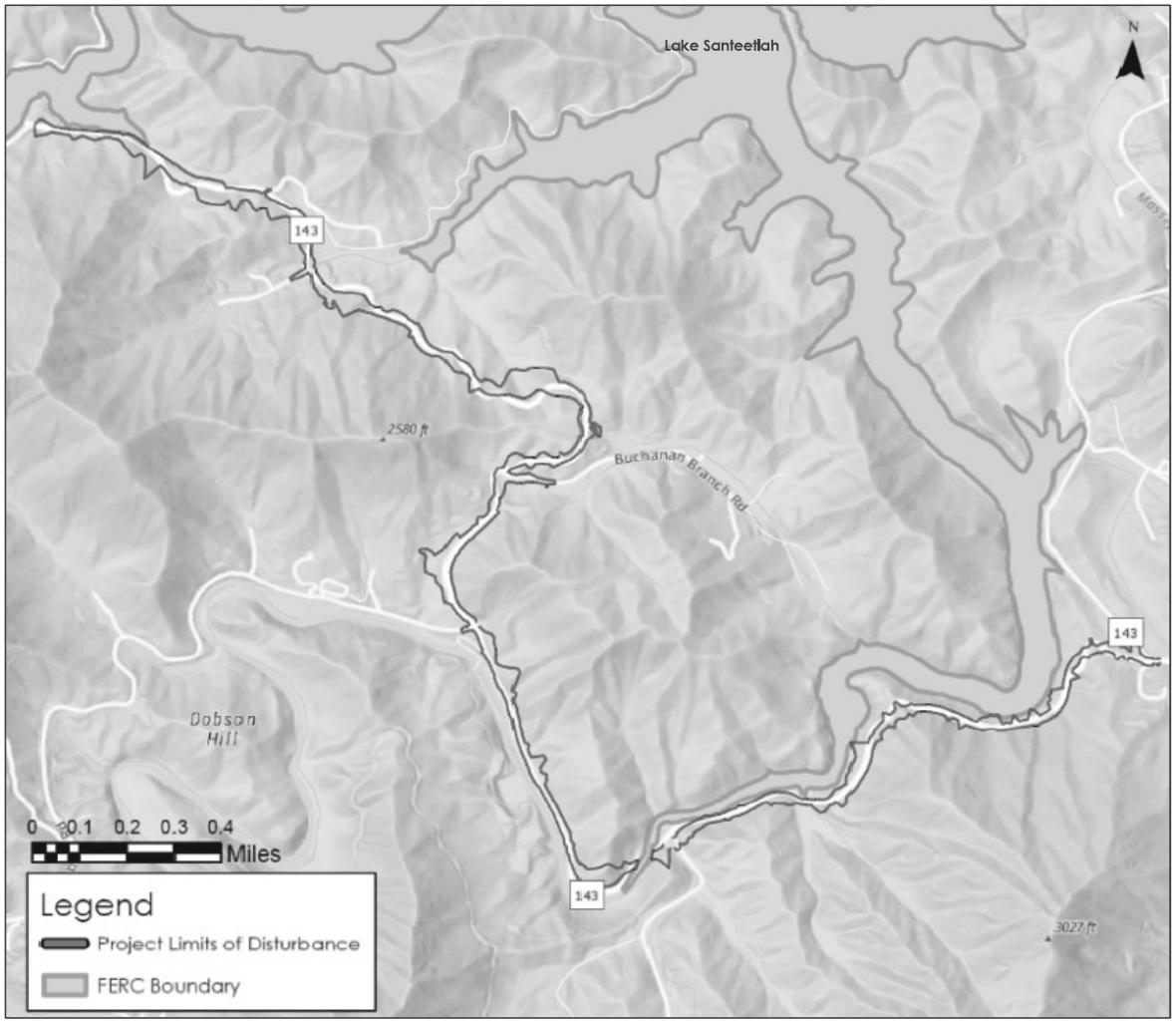
- Snowbird Picnic Area parking lots and access revisions





FERC Coordination

- Lake Santeetlah is a designated Hydropower River and a FERC property
- Brookfield Smokey Mountain Hydro Power currently owns the Special Use Permit.
- The Project Limits of Disturbance have minor impacts to the FERC boundary; therefore, additional coordination will be required.



Schedule

Schedule Review

Date	Milestone
Spring 2025 – Fall 2026	Revisit Section 106 Effects
Summer 2025	FERC Coordination Meeting
September 2026 & November 2026	Pre-Merger Project Update Meeting
Winter 2027	4A Merger Meeting
Spring 2027	4B/4C Merger Meeting
Fall 2028	FERC Approval
Summer 2029	Right-of-Way Certification
Summer 2029	Utility Certification
Fall 2029	Construction

**Future dates are subject to change*

Contact Us

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