



THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON

JUL 05 2006

The Honorable Richard Burr
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Burr:

I appreciate your concern for the aging Herbert C. Bonner Bridge in Dare County, North Carolina. The bridge is the only way for people to drive to and from communities on Hatteras Island for business, recreation, escape prior to a storm, and re-entry after a storm. I agree with you that it is important that we work together to find a way to replace the bridge as soon as possible to protect the health and safety of the public.

As you know, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Park Service have been working for a number of years with the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT), the Federal Highway Administration, and other State and Federal agencies in planning for replacement of the bridge and for the realignment of North Carolina Highway 12 as it passes through Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge. I appreciate efforts made by the NCDOT to conduct this planning process in compliance with all applicable environmental laws and regulations, including the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1997 (Refuge Act). The Refuge Act requires that any new use or modification of an existing use must be found to be compatible with, and not interfere with, or detract from, the fulfillment of the mission of the entire National Wildlife Refuge System, and the specific wildlife conservation purposes of the refuge.

After further review of the situation, I believe that the best way to proceed would be to separate the replacement of the Bonner Bridge, a project whose delay could constitute a clear and present safety issue for all concerned, from the more difficult and less urgent issues of the realignment of the road. We believe the replacement of the bridge itself could be accomplished in a way which is compatible with the Refuge Act, and other laws, if it is constructed within the same alignment or with minor changes to the current alignment. With this understanding, the NCDOT could quickly conclude their planning and begin construction of a bridge to replace the existing bridge that you have told me is an imminent threat to public safety.

I pledge the support of the Department of the Interior to allow replacement of the bridge, providing safe transportation while protecting important wildlife resources on Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge. I welcome an opportunity to discuss this proposal with you in more detail at your convenience.

A similar letter is being sent to Governor Michael F. Easley.

Sincerely,



DIRK KEMPTHORNE