

## **Integration of North Carolina's Conservation and Transportation Planning**

### **North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources**

Total Cost: \$274,257, FHWA Share: \$136,689

Period of Performance: 25 months, Dates: April 3, 2008 –April 30, 2010\*

AOTR: Dennis Durbin; Grant Project Website: <http://www.onencnaturally.org/>

### **Project Goals**

The North Carolina Department of Environmental and Natural Resources (NCDENR) grant project goal is to develop a Strategic Conservation Plan for North Carolina and to collaborate with NCDOT to integrate the *Eco-Logical* framework into the transportation planning process. A major project component is a series of wildlife habitat maps for each of the State's regions, which NCDENR has nearly completed.

### **Project Activities**

NCDENR completed a pilot in Hickory, North Carolina, to test the initial tools created as part of this project. The Hickory MPO found that the tools and biodiversity data that NCDENR provided was helpful in pre-planning and setting fieldwork priorities, but utilizing the data did not substitute for a more complete environmental analysis.

### **Key Accomplishments**

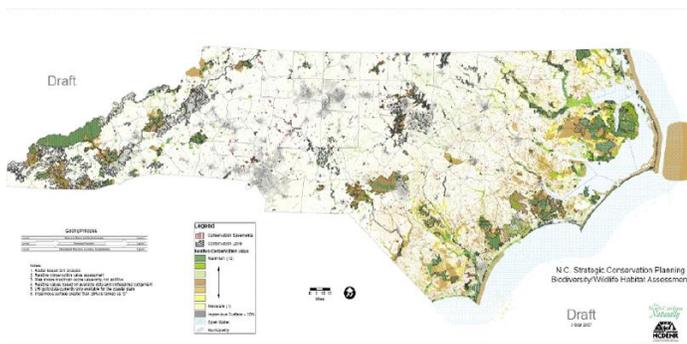
A new data system will allow the agency to continue to work with current project partners to ensure the system's data remains current and is actively applied to transportation planning projects. Initial data from the grant project has already received validation from the Natural Heritage Trust Fund Board of Trustees as well as other North Carolina land trusts that are using the new data or requiring others to use the data. NCDENR staff is also serving on an interagency integration team at NCDOT to improve the long range planning and project delivery process.

### **Challenges**

NCDENR identified keeping data current amid North Carolina's rapid development as a major challenge to its *Eco-Logical* project. To cope with this issue, NCDENR partnered with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC), an agency that receives regular funding through State wildlife grants to frequently generate data. Another challenge NCDENR identified was integrating ecological considerations into a planning process that is traditionally motivated by economic and transportation issues. NCDENR believes that the provision of strong, reliable data that show clear benefits of an *Eco-Logical* approach will help to change the underlying culture in transportation agencies.

### **Future Steps**

As NCDENR obtains biodiversity data from completed mapping in the rest of the State, it will circulate the data to all of North Carolina's RPOs and MPOs for use in pre-planning. NCDENR hopes that using this new data will help planners avoid environmentally sensitive areas when planning transportation projects. As the project continues, NCDENR will continue to meet regularly with its Interagency Leadership Team, which consists of representatives from Federal and State resource and transportation agencies, to determine how to make mapping and data most useful to the transportation process.



**Figure: Sample Wildlife Habitat Assessment map from the project's "Conservation Planning Tool."**