

# Bonner Bridge Replacement

## Long Bridge Restores Safe, Reliable Transportation and a Restored National Wildlife Refuge on North Carolina's Outer Banks

### Background

North Carolina Highway 12 currently crosses Oregon Inlet south of the town of Nags Head and runs through Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) to Hatteras Island. The Bonner Bridge spanning Oregon Inlet is old and needs to be replaced for safety concerns. The North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) is considering alternatives to replace the Bonner Bridge. One alternative ("short bridge alternative") to the Bonner Bridge is putting a bridge farther west and parallel to the existing bridge and re-aligning much of NC-12 through the refuge. The best alternative, supported by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is to build a 17-mile bridge ("long bridge alternative") beginning near the existing Bonner Bridge, crossing Pamlico Sound and extending to the northern tip of Hatteras Island, which would completely bypass Pea Island. For reasons concerning public safety, cost, and ecological protection, the long bridge alternative is the only feasible solution.

### The Long Bridge is Safer and More Reliable

Due to its close proximity to the coast, the section of NC-12 that runs through Pea Island NWR is regularly flooded and buried with sand making it impassable. This means that residents and visitors have no safe evacuation route onto mainland North Carolina from the Outer Banks. The long bridge alternative remedies this safety concern by providing a dependable method of travel, free from the threat of overwash and traffic disruption during storms and emergencies.

### The Long Bridge is More Cost Effective

The ocean is claiming 10 to 15 feet of land every year, moving closer to NC-12 through Pea Island NWR.

This requires constant maintenance and road relocation costs up to \$1 million or more a year. Millions of dollars have already been spent removing sand from the road after storm events. The cost of maintaining NC-12 through 2060 and the construction of the short bridge is \$683 million. The construction of the long bridge will cost \$425 million. The choice is clear: The longer bridge does not require excessive annual maintenance and will therefore save taxpayers money in the long run.



NC-12 on Pea Island NWR is under constant threat of being flooded with sand and water.

### The Long Bridge Will Help Restore a National Wildlife Refuge

Established in 1937 as a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife, Pea Island NWR is one of our most popular and most important national wildlife refuges. With 13 miles of ocean beach and wetlands, Pea Island NWR is one of the last undeveloped barrier islands in the country. However, artificial dunes and other infrastructure designed to prevent overwash of NC-12 and erosion of portions of Pea Island have had profound negative impacts on the refuge's diverse habitat types and associated wildlife species. Barrier islands, like Pea Island, are dynamic. The Pea Island ecosystem depends on occasional overwash of sand to build up marshes in Pamlico Sound. Hardening of the northern end of Pea Island has exacerbated erosion further south by affecting the flow and deposition of sand. The interaction of these two forces has led to the loss of wildlife habitat and the shrinking of Pea Island by a fifth of its area since it was established as a refuge. By completely bypassing the refuge, the

long bridge allows for the restoration of these natural forces and habitat can be restored for migratory birds, sea turtles and other species.

### **The Short Bridge Threatens Bi-Partisan National Wildlife Refuge Law**

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act, passed in 1997, established strong standards for managing the refuge system, including a requirement that any use of a refuge, including new rights of ways, be compatible with the purposes of the refuge and the mission of the refuge system. The short bridge and required realignment of NC-12 has been found incompatible with the wildlife conservation purpose of the Pea Island NWR by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). Any legislative override of this determination would open the floodgates to damaging proposals on refuges throughout the country and severely weaken the protections afforded to these national treasures.



Pintails on Pea Island NWR. Their wetland habitat will be destroyed as a result of the short bridge

### **Commitment to Visitor Access**

FWS is committed to maintaining access to outdoor recreational activities on Pea Island NWR. The refuge will continue to welcome visitors to fish, bird watch and enjoy the refuge. The long bridge alternative will drastically improve visitors' experience on the refuge by providing long-term protection for the wildlife and habitat that attract so many enthusiasts. It is not possible to keep the road where it is, so alternate means of access are necessary no matter which bridge is built. One alternative to the long bridge that has been proposed would build a parallel bridge and span vulnerable sections of NC-12 through the refuge with additional bridges over time. Not only would this drastically escalate the cost of the project, but would limit access because these additional bridge

spans would not have access roads or exits. Additionally, once FWS has an access plan, the public will have many opportunities to comment.

### **Louisiana's Solution**

Louisiana, in a very similar situation to the Bonner Bridge replacement, has decided that a 17-mile bridge to replace Highway LA-1 is the safest way to provide safe, reliable transportation in an area frequently ravaged by storms. Like NC-12 with its close proximity to the coast, Highway LA-1 is subject to frequent and damaging flooding and faces the threat of being washed out and rendered impassable during storms. LA-1 is the only means of evacuation for 35,000 residents and 6,000 offshore workers, and provides the only transportation route for one of the nation's most important ports that services 16 percent to 18 percent of the nation's oil and gas. To ensure a safe, dependable and environmentally sound transportation route, the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development and the U.S. Department of Transportation have approved a plan to build a 17-mile long bridge to replace the dangerous LA-1 highway. U.S. Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta was quoted saying, "It is clear that a two-lane road that floods even at the sight of rain is no longer adequate to serve this important port." Louisiana had many of the same concerns as North Carolina and they decided that a long bridge to replace an unreliable evacuation route was the best solution. [The long bridge alternative of the Bonner Bridge in North Carolina follows this sound example from a hurricane ravaged state.](#)

### **For More Information Contact:**

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