

Building N.C. 540 across southern Wake County would not threaten the existence of two endangered species of mussels that live in Swift Creek, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. That opinion, published last week, greatly reduces the chance that the Federal Highway Administration will seek to stop or alter the construction of the final legs of the Triangle Expressway because of the endangered mussels -- the dwarf wedgemussel and the yellow lance.

The two types of thumb-size mussels have for years threatened to alter or derail the \$2.24 billion final leg of the 540-loop around Raleigh. The endangered dwarf wedgemussel was the reason the NCDOT considered an alternative path for the road known as the Red Route, which would have largely avoided the mussels while plowing through subdivisions, businesses and churches in Garner.

Instead, NCDOT consulted the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on other ways it could minimize the highway's impact on the mussels. These include steps to prevent sediment from washing into the creek during construction and to eliminate runoff from the highway going directly into the water. The endangered dwarf wedge, found in small numbers in the Swift Creek watershed south of Garner, is one of two mussels that have cast a large shadow over the \$2.2 billion final leg of the 540-loop around Raleigh.

NCDOT has also pledged \$5 million to establish and operate a laboratory to study the mussels and raise young ones to be released into the wild in Eastern North Carolina. The lab, at Historic Yates Mill County Park south of Raleigh, would be used by researchers at N.C. State University. The Fish and Wildlife Service says the mussel hatchery "fulfills an urgent need in the conservation and recovery" of dwarf wedgemussels in the Swift Creek watershed.

At the same time, the agency also concluded that building the road would likely have little effect on the mussels, if NCDOT and its contractors take care not to harm the creek during construction. The agency also noted that more homes and businesses will be built in southern Wake County regardless of whether the highway comes through and that the road will cause "a relatively small incremental increase in this development." It concludes that the impact of the additional development would likely not be "discernible or measurable."

*Source – The News & Observer*