**December 30, 2024**

## Natural Heritage Bureau, Division of Forests and Lands, DNCR

## Information on Permitting Process

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I.    **Average turnaround time for permit decision (from day of receipt to decision).**

The Natural Heritage Bureau (NHB) reviews approximately 1,800 projects a year.

There are 2 aspects to NHB review: 1) NHB issues a DataCheck letter and 2) NHB emails its final recommendations. NHB issues a DataCheck letter with instructions (e.g. email NHB additional information about the project). The applicant emails NHB and an email exchange occurs, with the culmination of NHB emailing out our final decision which concludes consultation.

1)  Current average turnaround time to issue DataCheck letter is 12 business days (approximate range of 10-15 business days).

2)  Current average turnaround time to make final decision is five days** (approximate range of 3-7 business days). **Note this assumes that plant surveys during the growing season are **not** needed. When plant surveys are needed, they must be conducted during the growing season when the species can be identified.  At least 30% of projects with impacts to rare plants require surveys.

Assumptions included in all of turnaround times:
- DataCheck application is administratively complete (e.g. NHB staff have all of the information and payment has been received - check has been received either via mail or dropped off).
- That we have not received any long linear projects. Long linear projects (e.g. utility corridor projects) require greater time and resources to process, when these projects are submitted, all other projects to be reviewed are delayed due to the time and effort needed to review these longer and often higher impact projects.
- Current staffing levels at NHB which is one Env. reviewer (Env. Scientist 3) and one Ecological program specialist (Env. Scientist 1).
- Standard volume of applications. There are several times throughout the year when NHB receives a higher volume of applications.  NHB works hard to process these, but delays of several days can occur during these times.
- Consultants provide a timely response to NHB's requests.

**Plant survey example,** an application is submitted in January, NHB DataCheck letter is issued with requests for surveys to take place when that species is identifiable (e.g. late June.)
The applicant is responsible for timely submittal of survey results to NHB. NHB reviews these in a timely manner and then responds with final decision.

II.    **Step by step process of permit approval. Please include the software and programs used.**

1. Applicant submits a project on the online-web based NHB DataCheck Tool.
2. If the DataCheck Tool flags a project area for potential impacts to rare species, the applicant mails a check to NHB.
3. NHB receives and processes check and adds to queue of projects to review.
4. NHB pulls information from the DataCheck Tool into Microsoft Access and ArcGIS Pro through a series of automatic and manual processes for the purpose of prepping a subset of projects to be reviewed.
5. Initial desktop reviews are conducted by overlaying NHB's database of rare plant and wildlife records against submitted project areas in ArcGIS Pro to assess potential impacts.
6. NHB utilizes Access and Word to compile project information and Outlook email to send out the DataCheck Letters, which may include comments requesting additional information (e.g. photos, project plans).
7. NHB waits for the applicant to respond to the DataCheck Letter over email or phone to provide the requested additional information and initiate the review.
8. Follow up coordination is completed through Outlook email where the Environmental Reviewer coordinates with applicants by reviewing plans and photos, asking questions, and sometimes requesting surveys.
9. Applicant submits permit to DES and references the DataCheck Letter.

**Note**: Some applicants are on a tight timeline to submit a permit to NHDES and cannot wait until surveys are completed during the growing season to submit permits. In cases like this, NHB allows the consultant to submit their permit before surveys are completed with the condition that no work occur until plant surveys are completed during the appropriate time of year.

### III. Positions related to permitting process, salary information, funding source for each position

Environmental reviewer (Environmental Scientist 3 classification): This position assesses impacts to rare plants and exemplary natural communities during desktop reviews and coordinates with applicants once DataCheck Letters are received to provide recommendations to avoid and minimize impacts.
$65,806 (sal+ben)  A portion of this position is used as match for federal grant.
Funded by:
- DataCheck revenue (currently only applications that have potential impacts to rare species pay $25)
- Long linear projects (e.g. utility corridors) revenue ($60/hour)
- Data sharing agreements
- Conservation License plate
- Federal grant

Ecological program specialist (Env. Scientist 1): This public facing position provides customer service to applicants submitting projects to the DataCheck Tool and navigating the permitting process. In addition, this position prepares information for desktop reviews, conducts reviews with NHFG, and compiles and sends out DataCheck Letters.
$60,139 - A portion of this position is used as match for federal grant.
Funded by:
- Conservation license plate
- Federal grant

IV.   **Areas in which DNCR can make improvements to efficiency of permitting process within the next 3-6 months.**

- Fund the Ecological program specialist position in FY26-27 budget. The Ecological program specialist position is proposed to be <u>unfunded</u> in DNCR's FY 26-27 budget. This public facing position provides customer service to users of the DataCheck tool, prepares and performs the initial Datacheck review and processes checks making it essential to continue this position's funding. If the position is unfunded, this reduces staffing to one person, which will cause delays in turnaround times.
- Increase outreach by providing trainings to applicants on how to use the DataCheck Tool, circulate NHB's existing training video to a wider audience, and create new training videos on specific environmental review topics useful to the public through the Division of Forests and Lands YouTube page. This will ensure that applicants are fully informed as to how to submit a complete DataCheck request and better understand the steps in the process and timelines and allows staff to use time more effectively.
- Evaluate whether to eliminate the maps that are currently on the DataCheck letters (reduce time spent labeling species on maps on the DataCheck letters) which would allow for projects to be reviewed faster and reduce applicants' wait time. NHB houses NH F&G's data on threatened and endangered wildlife through an MOU. NHB DataCheck letters include rare wildlife data (NHFG jurisdiction) and rare plant/exemplary natural community data (NHB jurisdiction). NHB and NH F&G would need to work together to assess removing maps from DataCheck letters.

**Upcoming improvements in 2026:**
NHB is bringing a contract to G&C next month to develop a new online software DataCheck tool by Jan. 2026 because the existing DataCheck tool is on an expired software platform. DES houses the current DataCheck Tool and has transferred ARPA funds to NHB to assist in the project. As part of this new online tool, online payments will become available by July 2026.