



February 8, 2023

House Committee on Agriculture, Land Use, Natural Resources, and Water
900 Court St. NE
Salem, OR 97301

Re: Central Oregon LandWatch Testimony in support of HB 2999

Dear Chair Helm, Vice-Chairs Hartman and Owens, and Honorable Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB 2999. Central Oregon LandWatch (“LandWatch”) is an Oregon non-profit, public interest organization of about 700 members. Its offices are located in Bend, Oregon. LandWatch’s mission is to defend and plan for Central Oregon’s livable future, and it has advocated for the preservation of natural resources in Central Oregon for over 30 years.

LandWatch strongly supports passage of HB 2999. The bill would strengthen the Oregon Department of Transportation’s program to reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions and fund mitigation projects, appropriate \$5 million to carryout projects to support wildlife mobility and habitat connectivity, and assist Oregon in securing federal dollars to advance wildlife habitat connectivity projects.

Across Oregon, the combined effects of development, roads, climate change, and human activity are taking a toll on both wildlife and their habitat. In Central Oregon, a report from the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife reveals that mule deer populations in Deschutes County declined 56% since 2004, with wildlife-vehicle collisions estimated to make up almost 30% of known mule deer deaths in the region.

Additional research on wildlife passage has only shed more light on the true costs of wildlife-vehicle collisions. In September 2022, researchers published new findings that vehicle damage, medical expenses, and lost hunting value impose an average cost of \$16,967 for a deer collision and \$56,782 for an elk collision. The cumulative cost for these two species alone on Oregon’s roads totaled \$91.7 million in 2022.¹

According to State Farm’s 2021 annual collision data analysis, motorists in Oregon are more likely to hit wildlife on our public roadways than in any other west coast state. And Oregon lags far behind its western state counterparts in developing and implementing solutions, such as dedicated wildlife crossing structures.

¹ Cumulative costs in 2022 dollars calculated by using 2022 ODOT Wildlife Collision Data, provisions of O.R.S. 496.705 (2) and Huijser, M.P. et al, 2022.

Highway 20 between Bend and Suttle Lake has the highest densities of deer and elk vehicle collisions in the entire state. The highway is increasingly becoming a more significant barrier to wildlife movement, and the concerns for the public and our region's wildlife are growing. The impacts to countless other wildlife species are often under-reported or not captured at all, leaving the actual impact hard to quantify.

LandWatch, along with state and federal agencies, private landowners, academic institutions, and nearly a dozen non-profit organizations, recently formed the Bend to Suttle Lake Wildlife Passage Initiative ("B2S"). Over the past year, B2S has conducted a series of field tours, meetings, and community outreach to explore potential solutions for improving wildlife passage and motorist safety along Highway 20 in Central Oregon. The group is now working on a wildlife crossing feasibility and conceptual design study that includes engineering and design for priority wildlife crossing areas identified by the Oregon Connectivity Assessment and Mapping Project.

Passing HB 2999 would support B2S and similar wildlife connectivity efforts in Oregon by strengthening state agency wildlife connectivity programs, funding important on-the-ground work to connect wildlife corridors, and building upon previous investments by the legislature. Importantly, HB 2999 would help Oregon compete for the unprecedented federal funding currently available through the IJA Wildlife Crossing Pilot Program and other federal grant programs by providing state matching dollars, allowing Oregon to capitalize on this once-in-a-generation opportunity.

LandWatch strongly supports passage of HB 2999.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jeremy Austin".

Jeremy Austin
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