

Deschutes Land Trust

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CONSERVATION. COMMUNITY. CARING FOR THE LAND.

February 9, 2023

Honorable Chair Helm and Members of the House Committee on Agriculture, Land Use, Natural Resources, and Water
900 Court St., NE
Salem, OR 97301

Re: Testimony in Support of HB 2999

Dear Chair Helm, Vice Chairs Hartman and Owen and Members of the Committee,

The Deschutes Land Trust (Land Trust) is pleased to provide this testimony in support of HB 2999. Connecting habitat across increasingly fragmented landscapes has been a particular focus of our work to conserve and care for the lands and waters that sustain Central Oregon. HB 2999 will enhance our efforts by bolstering Oregon Department of Transportation's (ODOT) existing program to reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions and providing much-needed funding to implement Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's Oregon Connectivity and Mapping Project.

The Land Trust is currently working with multiple local partners to assess opportunities to connect habitat in the Whychus area, through land protection and wildlife crossing efforts. Specifically, we've identified a migration corridor stretching from the confluence of Whychus Creek and the Deschutes River to Skyline Forest, a large private timber property adjacent to the Deschutes National Forest on the Cascades' eastern slope as a priority for land protection. This corridor comprises historic migratory routes and is bisected by Highway 20, a source of hundreds of wildlife-vehicle collisions every year. This is especially concerning for mule deer populations, which are declining throughout the region.

Recent studies have shown that a wildlife passage project on Highway 20 could significantly reduce the amount of wildlife-vehicle collisions and increase habitat connectivity for mule deer, elk and other species. ODOT completed two underpasses along U.S. 97 near Sunriver, OR in 2012 to provide animals a safe alternative to crossing the highway. A five-year monitoring effort determined that the crossing structures, together with the fencing and other exclusionary structures, reduced the number of wildlife-vehicle collisions by 86% and increased passage for over 30 species.

The Land Trust strongly supports HB 2999. As Central Oregon and other areas of the State face the dual threats of increasing land development and climate change, improved habitat connectivity is critical to maintaining the region's ability to support migratory species for generations to come. HB 2999 provides the resources to help implement more habitat connectivity projects and leverage federal funding to do so.

Sincerely,

Natasha Bellis

Natasha Bellis

Conservation Director