



February 11, 2023

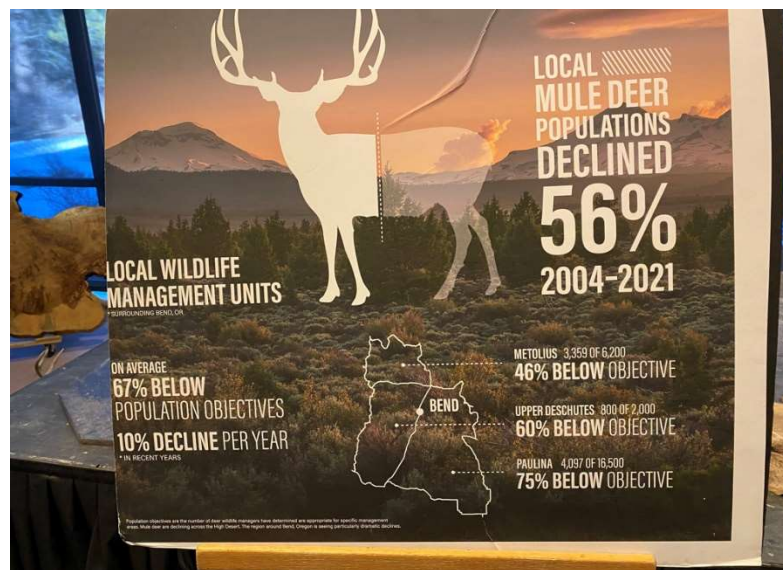
To: Chair Representative Helm, Vice Chairs Hartman and Owens, and members of the Committee,

From: Phil Chang, Deschutes County Commissioner

Re: Testimony in support HB 2999

I would like to provide testimony as a Deschutes County Commissioner in support of HB 2999 which would strengthen the language within the Oregon Department of Transportation’s (ODOT) existing program to fund, study, and/or construct wildlife crossings in the state. Additionally the bill would provide funding in the amount of \$5 million dollars from the General Fund to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife to improve wildlife habitat connectivity within priority corridors identified within the recently completed [Oregon Connectivity Assessment and Mapping Project](#).

The majority of Oregon’s five wildlife crossings are in Deschutes across Highway 97. Deschutes prime mule deer country, but unfortunately our once robust are in trouble. A report from the Department of Fish and Wildlife mule deer populations in Deschutes declined 56% since 2004, with vehicle collisions estimated to make 30% of known mule deer deaths in



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Figure 1- Graphic depicting ODFW Data by

Jon Nelson, Curator of Wildlife, High Desert Museum

The rate of wildlife vehicle collisions is a reported 1,000 per year on all roads (county, city of Bend and Highway 97). The public agencies estimate that the total of fatalities from collisions is between 3-5 times higher than the reported collisions, as many animals go off the road to die from their injuries.

The escalation of mule deer decline due to fragmented habitats and barriers to migration makes this situation an emergency. Crossings are a proven way to promote survival of wildlife. The wildlife undercrossing at Lava Butte was built in 2012 and has reduced collisions by 85% and reduced corresponding annual costs of up to \$32 million per 5,000 collisions. Wildlife crossings also connect habitat that is increasingly fragmented by development and recreation. Other western states have dozens of wildlife crossings and continue to build more. These crossings are key to the survival of migratory species like mule deer, elk, big horn Sheep and pronghorn. These species bring millions of dollars to central Oregon and are an important source of income and sustenance for rural communities.





Within Deschutes County, elected officials are working on efforts to identify ways to address these declines. Recently, the Deschutes County Commission voted to initiate a much needed update to the Goal 5 inventory for mule deer winter range in our 2023 work plan. The county will be outlining a public process to revise and expand the mule deer winter range throughout many places in the county. County staff will look to balance the importance of wildlife protection and development expectations and understand well that these two values do not have to be mutually exclusive. The current Wildlife Area Combining Zone for mule deer winter range covers approximately 315,847 acres. Through additional review of the data and latest available science, the county has identified an additional 188,000 acres of mule deer winter range that could be added to the Wildlife Area Combining Zone.

Additionally, nearly a dozen non-profit organizations, along with state and federal agencies, private landowners, and academic institutions recently formed the Bend to Suttle Lake Wildlife Passage Initiative ("B2S"). The goal of the B2S coalition improve wildlife passage on highway 20 between Bend and Suttle Lake, which 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. 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.

This bill is an important opportunity for Oregon's elected officials to support a building block and funding source to help Oregon maintain and restore wildlife connectivity for a variety of species within our state. In addition to supporting statewide wildlife crossing structures and restoring habitat within priority corridors, the funding in HB 2999 will be critical as a state match when state agencies apply for new federal grants such as the Wildlife Crossing Grant Program in the 2021 federal infrastructure bill or the America the Beautiful grant program through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

In conclusion, House Bill 2999 would invest in critical projects in the near-term, as well as help move the state toward a longer-term investment strategy. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Phil Chang  
Deschutes County Commissioner

