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**February 2, 2022**

**House Committee On Environment and Natural Resources**  
**Chair Representative Brad Witt**  
**Vice-Chair Representative Chris Gorsek**  
**900 Court Street NE**  
**Salem, OR 97301**

**Re: Testimony in support of funding for the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program Dear Co-Chair Representative Brad Witt, Vice-Chair Representative Chris Gorsek, and Members of the Subcommittee,**

I am writing to express Deschutes Land Trust's strong support of funding for the Wildlife Crossing Investment Act (House Bill 4130).

Since our founding in 1995, the Deschutes Land Trust (Land Trust) has conserved and restored land throughout the Deschutes Basin, with a particular focus on the area near Whychus Creek, a major tributary of the Deschutes River running through Sisters, Oregon. At the outset, our vision was to create functional habitat for anadromous fish and migrating deer and elk along the creek by conserving a corridor consisting of both former and active farm and ranch land. To date, we have protected nearly 10 miles of Whychus Creek via conservation easements, fee simple acquisitions, and one pass-through acquisition resulting in the expansion of the Crooked River National Grasslands.

As we transition our focus from protecting riparian areas along Whychus Creek to restoring these key habitats, we have also begun assessing opportunities to protect a more extensive terrestrial migration corridor in the Whychus area to improve habitat connectivity across an increasingly fragmented landscape. Specifically, the Land Trust—along with biologists at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) and the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT)—have identified the region 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. This corridor comprises a patchwork of public and private lands, and includes Highway 20, a major highway bisecting historic migratory routes along this corridor.

ODOT documents hundreds of wildlife-vehicle collisions (WVC) along Highway 20 every year. This is especially concerning for mule deer populations, which are declining throughout the region. Each year, ODOT documents more than 152 mule deer carcasses

LANDS IN TRUST PROTECTED FOREVER



along Highway 20 as the result of vehicle strikes. Furthermore, ODFW estimates between 50-100% of the number recorded are wounded and die away from the road bed. Thus, the annual number of deer mortalities could be as high as 450 animals. This high rate of mortality accounts for almost 30% of known mule deer deaths in central Oregon (Schuyler et al. 2018).

Recent studies have shown that a wildlife passage project on Highway 20 could significantly reduce the amount of WVCs 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 funding to select and prioritize wildlife passage features to increase connectivity for species while decreasing wildlife vehicle collisions along Highway 20. As Central Oregon faces 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.

*Sincerely,*

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rika Ayotte". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rika Ayotte  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR