

February 6, 2024

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 4148 - Support

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

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB 4148. Central Oregon LandWatch (“LandWatch”) is an Oregon non-profit, public interest organization of more than 950 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 preserving natural resources in Central Oregon for over 30 years.

LandWatch strongly supports the passage of HB 4148. The bill would address key wildlife issues affecting Oregon. Of particular interest to LandWatch is the wildlife corridors section, which would continue to strengthen the Oregon Department of Transportation’s program to reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions across Oregon.

Across Oregon, the combined effects of development, roads, climate change, and human activity are taking a toll on 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 have 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 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.



In Central Oregon, 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 on countless other wildlife species are often under-reported or not captured, leaving the impact hard to quantify.

LandWatch and state and federal agencies, private landowners, academic institutions, and nearly a dozen non-profit organizations formed the Bend to Suttle Lake Wildlife Passage Initiative ("B2S") in 2022 to improve motorist safety and wildlife passage along this 35-mile corridor. Since then, B2S has conducted a series of field tours, meetings, and community outreach to explore potential solutions along Highway 20 in Central Oregon. The group is now working on a wildlife crossing feasibility study that will assist in identifying priority wildlife crossing areas.

In 2019, the Oregon legislature passed legislation directing the Oregon Department of Transportation and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife to coordinate efforts to reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions. Since then, \$12 million has been allocated to support wildlife crossing initiatives across the state.

More support is needed to address the issue's scale across Oregon and compete with other states for the unprecedented federal funding available through the IJA Wildlife Crossing Pilot Program and other federal grant programs. Passing HB 4148 builds upon the vital work the legislature has done on wildlife passage by taking necessary steps toward establishing a permanent, dedicated program and funding sources for improving the safety of motorists and wildlife in Oregon.

LandWatch strongly supports the passage of HB 4148.

Sincerely,



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