



February 6, 2024

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: Wildlands Network supports wildlife coexistence package HB 4148.

Dear Chair Helm and Members of the House Committee on Agriculture, Land Use, Natural Resources, and Water:

My name is David Ellenberger, and I am the Oregon Project Manager for Wildlands Network. As an organization heavily invested in efforts to improve ecological habitat connectivity since the first wildlife corridor bill was passed in 2019, we are pleased to support HB 4148. This bill, which reaches beyond the successful wildlife movement corridors and road crossings efforts of recent years, will add extraordinary value to efforts to conserve Oregon's native wildlife by serving as a holistic wildlife coexistence package.

For thirty years, Wildlands Network has been a conservation leader specializing in restoring and protecting wildlife's ability to move across connected landscapes through science-based research and innovative policy. Within Oregon, our organization was active in developing and advocating for the 2019 passage of HB 2834, which gave rise to Oregon's forthcoming Wildlife Corridor Action Plan. More recently, in 2022, Wildlands Network advocated for the Oregon legislature to set aside \$7,000,000 into the Oregon Transportation Infrastructure Fund to fund projects that reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions and improve habitat connectivity for wildlife. We also supported HB 2999 and, eventually, HB 5030 last year, which provided \$5 million for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) to carry out needed projects identified in its Oregon Connectivity Assessment and Mapping Project (OCAMP). These projects will decrease habitat fragmentation for iconic Oregon species and, in many cases, simultaneously reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions (WVCs). Additionally, the bill clarified the Oregon Department of Transportation's (ODOT's) reporting requirements to the legislature for its WVC reduction program, which will ensure that Oregon has a clear implementation timeline and strategy for reducing WVCs and improving public safety on our roadways. Lastly, the funding made available by last year's bill carries the promise of helping to leverage available federal grant dollars and empower agencies and organizations to submit proposals to the Oregon Conservation and Recreation Fund to carry out projects supporting wildlife mobility and habitat connectivity.

In a similar vein, HB 4148 builds upon years of collaborative, bipartisan, and public and private efforts to increase public safety on our roadways and restore habitat for wildlife, while also galvanizing Oregon's response to addressing wildlife disease, responding to the increasing threat of invasive species, and promoting wildlife stewardship and coexistence.

While our organization stands in support of the totality of funding and policy included in HB 4148, we are particularly knowledgeable on the wildlife corridors and road crossings section of

the legislation and would like to expand on how the bill's language could help advance initiatives in Oregon, as similar language has in other western states in recent years.

HB 4148 clarifies that feasibility studies for new road mitigation projects are an important aspect of ODOT's program to reduce WVCs. Such studies, while relatively inexpensive compared to overall project costs, provide invaluable ground-truthing and data that helps inform planning and design efforts and ensures successful project completion on the ground. It's important for Oregon to take this important first step on multiple projects across the state, as it helps get projects "in the hopper," both to attract local stakeholder engagement and potential future federal funding.

The bill also directs ODOT to update the "guidance, standards and specifications of highways that are necessary for incorporating wildlife corridor features into the design, construction and modification of highways." This section of the legislation is something that we have seen adopted in California and Nevada in recent years. Updating this guidance can help increase institutional awareness of wildlife concerns within transportation agencies, save money by not having to redesign projects specifications from scratch with each project, and allow engineers to make better informed decisions on incorporating wildlife mitigation features into ongoing road construction and maintenance.

Our organization strongly supports the other technical amendments in the bill that will lead to more robust planning and reporting requirements from ODOT, particularly as it concerns ongoing identification of dedicated program funding sources and federal grant availability. New requirements that will lead to a public-facing prioritization of wildlife-vehicle collision reduction projects from ODOT (in consultation with ODFW) is also a welcome measure. Other states, like Colorado and New Mexico, with clear project priority lists have benefitted from the ability to collectively (in collaboration with non-agency stakeholders) focus all efforts and resources to construct the identified priority wildlife crossings. This has led to increased partnership and stakeholder involvement.

Wildlands Network commends the legislature for its previous work addressing wildlife conservation, habitat fragmentation and WVCs, and we ask that it continue moving this important work forward by passing HB 4148.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this important issue.

Sincerely,



David Ellenberger
Oregon Project Manager



Erin Sito
U.S. Public Policy Director