

February 5, 2025

House Committee on Agriculture, Land Use, Natural Resources, and Water
900 Court St. NE
Salem, OR 97301

Re: HB 2978 - Support

Co-Chair Helm and Owens, Vice-Chair McDonald, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HB 2978. 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 2978.

Each year, there are over 7,000 wildlife-vehicle collisions in Oregon; on average, four people die and 521 people are seriously injured in those collisions. Recent research has shown that vehicle damage, medical expenses, and lost hunting value impose an average cost of \$18,186 for a deer collision and \$60,863 for an elk collision. The annual cost in Oregon for deer-vehicle collisions alone totals \$114 million per year; elk collisions are estimated to cost Oregonians another \$26 million each year.

In Central Oregon, the 25 miles of Highway 20 between Bend and Suttle Lake has the highest densities of deer and elk vehicle collisions in the entire state, with 350-600 deer and elk killed each year by vehicle strike. With traffic volumes rising, concerns about the public’s safety and our region’s wildlife are growing.

In light of the dangerous situation on Highway 20, LandWatch, state and federal agencies, tribal partners, 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 completed a feasibility study identifying a total of eleven potential locations where wildlife crossings would improve the safety of motorists and wildlife. The coalition selected four sites as the top priority for construction and is now actively fundraising the non-federal match required to apply to the



federal Wildlife Crossings Pilot Program, one of 15 federal grant opportunities available right now to support wildlife crossing infrastructure and wildlife corridor conservation.

In December 2024, Oregon won \$33 million in federal Wildlife Crossings Pilot Program Grant dollars to construct the state's first wildlife overpass. The crossings will be built over I-5 between Ashland and the California boarder. Oregon utilized a portion of the \$7 million the legislature allocated in 2022 to leverage these federal dollars for crossings.

While this win for Oregon is a cause for much celebration, more support is needed to address the scale of the issue across the state, including along Highway 20 in Central Oregon. HB 2978 and a directly related effort that would establish a permanent funding mechanism to support crossing initiatives, are critically important to the success of B2S and other crossing initiative across the state. Passing HB 2978 builds upon the significant progress the legislature has made in recent years, taking necessary steps to improve policy, agency coordination, and the development of projects so Oregon can better address the problem of wildlife-vehicle collisions.

LandWatch strongly supports the passage of HB 2978.

Sincerely,



Jeremy Austin
Wild Lands & Water Program Director
Central Oregon LandWatch
2843 NW Lolo Dr St. 200
Bend, OR 97703

