



April 15, 2025

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 crossing policy advancements in HB 2978-A.

Dear Chair Golden and Members of the Senate Committee On Natural Resources and Wildfire:

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 2978-A. The policies included in this bill, some of which were drawn from best practices observed in other states, will build upon Oregon's successful efforts in recent years to identify and safeguard wildlife movement corridors, establish life-saving wildlife crossing solutions over and under roads, attract federal dollars and improve safety for the benefit of motorists and wildlife alike.

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 Wildlife Corridor Action Plan (WCAP). More recently, in 2022, Wildlands Network advocated for the Oregon legislature to set aside \$7 million 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 in 2023, which provided \$5 million for the Oregon Conservation and Recreation Fund (OCRF) to support wildlife mobility and habitat connectivity within priority corridors identified in the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's (ODFW) Oregon Connectivity Assessment and Mapping Project (OCAMP) tool. These projects will decrease habitat fragmentation for iconic Oregon species and, in many cases, simultaneously reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions (WVCs). The funding directed through both of the previous funding bills can also help leverage available federal grant dollars and empower agencies and organizations to submit proposals to carry out projects supporting wildlife mobility and habitat connectivity. To date, the Oregon Department of Transportation has already used a portion of the

\$7 million appropriation from 2022, and will soon spend out the remainder in order to leverage \$33 million in federal grant funding to build Oregon's first wildlife overpass on I-5 connecting the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument in Southern Oregon.

In a similar vein, the policy measures included in HB 2978 build upon years of collaborative, bipartisan, and public and private efforts to increase public safety on our roadways and restore habitat for wildlife. If passed into law, they will provide the state with a solid foundation upon which we can make continued future progress in reconnecting important wildlife habitats, reducing high rates of WVCs that cost well-over \$100 million annually, and helping our state agencies leverage and attract key resources for building life-saving crossing structures.

HB 2978-A proposes many key changes to improve Oregon's existing connectivity law and ODOT's wildlife-vehicle reduction program. First, the bill 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 crucial 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 "wildlife guidance materials and standards, and [to] specifications of highways, to incorporate wildlife crossing and wildlife-vehicle collision reduction 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 project 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 forward-thinking policies in the bill that will lead to more robust consultation, planning and coordination between ODOT and ODFW to more fully address the impacts to wildlife corridor connectivity across our transportation system. Under this bill, agencies have an opportunity to take the lead on setting up a multi-stakeholder initiative aimed at spurring collaborative resource sharing between agencies and with partner NGOs, Tribes, community organizations and many others. Such wildlife and transportation "alliances" have been crucial in other states such as Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana for getting organized and having the best minds working together towards shared goals. Relatedly, this legislation would allow for the creation of a training program within ODOT that would educate staff and other stakeholders on the advantages of incorporating wildlife crossing solutions in all aspects of transportation planning.

For decades, the vast majority of Oregon's network of 79,045 miles of roadways (and 4,295 miles of national highways) were constructed with little, if any, thought given to wildlife needs or concerns. This legislation would make positive amends to this antiquated approach by requiring that ODOT and ODFW coordinate - to the maximum extent feasible - on ways to avoid, minimize or mitigate impacts to habitat connectivity when new roads are built, or when the agency is initiating roadway improvements and/or modifications. We applaud this approach, noting that it is generally more affordable to incorporate wildlife infrastructure in the earliest stages of new road or road upgrade construction. Additionally, this provision will ensure that the investments that our state agencies have made in the WCAP and the OCAMP tool are fully utilized and don't just sit on a shelf collecting dust.

Lastly, we are encouraged by the new detailed planning and reporting requirements this measure asks of 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 a great step forward. 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 at each stage of the process.

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 2978-A.

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

Sincerely,



David Ellenberger
Oregon Project Manager



Erin Sito
U.S. Public Policy Director