

Guest column: The time to fund wildlife crossings is now

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Op-Ed by Ted Wise

As a former biologist with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, I've witnessed the negative impacts of wildlife-vehicle collisions on our communities. Each year, thousands of Oregon motorists experience the trauma of hitting an animal on the road. Between 2020 and 2024 the Oregon Department of Transportation had 26,650 reported wildlife-vehicle accidents, while stating that these numbers are likely conservative estimates. The cost of a wildlife-vehicle collision can be significant, with vehicle damage amounting to thousands of dollars and the financial strain can extend well beyond the cost of vehicle repair. A personal injury sustained in a wildlife vehicle accident can lead to missed work, long-term medical expenses, and may also result in tragic human fatalities.

Oregonians need to understand that the impacts of wildlife-vehicle collisions extend beyond just humans. Each year many thousands of animals are killed or injured on Oregon roadways. The list of wildlife at risk includes large and small mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians. Deer and elk are particularly vulnerable during their seasonal movements to and from summer and wintering ranges. And these big game species account for most of the reported vehicle accidents. The impacts on Oregon's mule deer and black-tailed deer population resulting from wildlife-vehicle collisions are significant.

The problem extends well beyond animal injuries and mortalities. Oregon's 79,045 miles of roadways fragment wildlife habitats and bisect essential migration routes. Animals need to move across the land to access food, water, and shelter, and Oregon's

increasingly roaded landscape and increasing volume of traffic puts wildlife and drivers at risk.

Fortunately, there are proven solutions to this issue. The use of wildlife crossings, overpasses, underpasses, and fencing is effective and greatly mitigates the number of animals being hit by vehicles. The Crawford and Lava Butte underpasses near Bend, reduced collisions by over 90% in the first two years.

There are places in Oregon that desperately need these projects. Take Highway 20 between Bend and Suttle Lake; this 35-mile stretch has the highest density of deer and elk collisions in the state. Dedicated groups of people who see the value of this type of infrastructure are organizing regionally to help raise the funds to build such crossings, but without dedicated investment Oregon will continue to lag behind its Western state counterparts in building dedicated crossing structures.

To those who might express concern about the public cost of such infrastructure; take note that these structures pay for themselves quickly, saving anywhere from \$250,000 to \$443,000 per year in avoided collisions and associated costs. They are a worthwhile investment in our communities and the wildlife that are a critical part of them.

Right now, we have a rare opportunity to close this funding gap. Oregon recently secured \$33 million from the federal Wildlife Crossings Pilot Program, using a portion of funding the Oregon State Legislature allocated in 2022, and there are additional federal grant opportunities available for wildlife connectivity projects. Our Oregon state

legislators and representatives must take full advantage of these federal funds and show us they care about making our roadways safer.

The current 2025 legislative session presents a critical moment for us to create meaningful, long-lasting change on this front. Making our roads safer for drivers and wildlife by reducing wildlife-vehicle collisions is a bipartisan win. Oregon lawmakers have the chance to establish dedicated funding for

statewide wildlife crossing infrastructure, ensuring that we don't leave federal dollars on the table or let another year pass without action. I urge the legislature to invest in a future where people and wildlife can move safely through our state. We have the knowledge, the resources, and the public support; now it's time to get it done.

Ted Wise lives in Bend.

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