

Lawmakers pass bill that could reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions

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A bill to improve coordination between state agencies to facilitate the construction of wildlife crossings has passed the Oregon Legislature.

House Bill 2978 facilitates coordination between agencies to increase wildlife crossings at key areas, including parts of Central Oregon. The vote on Wednesday was broadly supported by the Oregon senate, passing 24 votes to three.

Central Oregon is already home to several wildlife crossings, most of them under U.S. Highway 97 south of Bend. Crossings located near Lava Butte, Sunriver and Gilchrist are used by dozens of species but are particularly designed to help migrating elk and mule deer cross highways to reach summer and winter grounds.

The crossings have a dual purpose, saving both the lives of animals and protecting vehicles from collisions. South of Bend, the Lava Butte crossing has cut down vehicle-wildlife collisions by more than 85%.

Plenty of crashes still occur across the state, around 4,800 such crashes occurred in 2022 alone. The bill now heads to Oregon Governor Tina Kotek's desk for her signature.

"The bill builds upon the progress over the past five-plus years that the Legislature has made on wildlife connectivity and improving the safety of our roadways," said Jeremy Austin, wild lands and water program director for Central Oregon LandWatch, an environmental non-profit.

Cidney Bowman, the wildlife passage program leader with ODOT, said her agency and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife already have a history of working together on wildlife safe passages

but the bill opens the door to involving more groups with a stake in reducing wildlife-vehicle crashes.

"Bringing in other groups will help focus efforts when it comes to going for grants and getting us all more coordinated at a statewide level," she said.

The bill includes the following:

- Creates an advisory group of representatives from local governments and nonprofits, as well as professionals in biology and engineering. The group will be tasked with conducting outreach on wildlife crossing projects.
- Directs the Oregon Department of Transportation and the Department of Fish and Wildlife to jointly identify high priority areas to build or improve wildlife safe passage. Effectively, the bill requires ODOT to incorporate wildlife crossings into highway design.

Rules that help guide wildlife crossings could speed up progress on current projects underway in Central Oregon, including plans to build a series of crossings over U.S. Highway 20 near Black Butte. That project recently hit a funding milestone of over \$1 million as it moves toward the engineering, design and planning phase.

What the bill doesn't do is provide funds for wildlife crossings. This is a significant difference compared to past legislation such as HB 5202, passed in 2022, which allocated \$7 million out of the general fund to pay for projects that reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions and improve habitat connectivity.

While funding is lacking, supporters say the new bill will give Oregon an edge when competing against other states for grants and funding.

“Having a well organized and well coordinated program makes Oregon a strong candidate for federal or philanthropic funding for projects,” said state Sen. Anthony Broadman, D-Bend, who supported the bill.

A timeline of completed and planned wildlife crossing projects in Central Oregon includes:

- In late 2012, ODOT completed construction of its first two wildlife underpasses on Highway 97 with corresponding fencing and deer guards as part of the highway widening project.
- In 2020, as part of a passing lane project near Gilchrist, ODOT completed construction of an additional wildlife undercrossing that tied into an existing bridge large enough to allow deer and elk to pass.

- In 2022, ODOT completed one additional wildlife undercrossing south of Lava Butte as part of a continuing highway widening of Highway 97.

- Wildlife crossing work on Highway 97 isn’t over. ODOT is planning a new overcrossing and undercrossing along the highway between Vandever Drive and the U.S. Forest Service boundary (south of Vandever). ODOT has completed the design for these crossings and has applied for construction funds under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law of 2021. A 3D virtual tour of this crossing plan is now online at vtour.123bim.com/WBJO/.

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