



May 25, 2021

The Honorable Nancy Skinner
Chair, Senate Committee on Budget and Fiscal Review
State Capitol
Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable Philip Ting
Chair, Assembly Committee on Budget
State Capitol
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: Request for \$1 Billion in Budget Allocation to Preserve and Enhance Wildlife Movement and Habitat Connectivity

Dear Chair Skinner and Chair Ting:

Healthy ecosystems and human health are inextricably linked. California's landscapes support high levels of biodiversity that help us regulate our climate, purify our air and water, pollinate our crops, and create healthy soil.¹ In addition, access and connectedness to nature provide physical and mental health benefits;² this has been highlighted during the Covid-19 pandemic as communities have turned to open space for safe and socially distanced gatherings. Despite these documented benefits, functional ecosystems and native biodiversity are deteriorating worldwide, primarily due to habitat loss and fragmentation.^{3,4}

To protect California's wildlife and natural landscapes, sustain critical ecosystem services and prepare for climate adaptation, we urge you to allocate \$1 billion in multi-year funding for increased investments to maintain and improve habitat connectivity and wildlife movement. Specifically, we ask that Wildlife Conservation Board's Habitat Conservation Fund include an allocation of \$800 million for the protection, restoration, and enhancement of natural and working lands and riparian corridors needed to enhance connectivity, and the Department of Transportation's capital outlays include an allocation of \$200 million for the construction of wildlife crossing infrastructure on existing highways, including overcrossings, undercrossings, and directional fencing in wildlife-vehicle collision hotspots known to pose a threat to motorist safety and sensitive wildlife species.

The importance of wildlife connectivity cannot be overstated. Roads and development create barriers that can affect an animal's behavior, movement patterns, reproductive success, and physiological state, which can lead to significant impacts on individual wildlife, populations, communities, and overall biodiversity and ecosystem health. Roads and development have been shown to cause harmful genetic isolation in mountain lions in Southern California and along the Central Coast,⁶ increase local extinction risk in amphibians and reptiles,⁷ cause high levels of avoidance behavior and mortality in birds⁸ and insects,⁹ and degrade plant communities.¹⁰

The State's mountain lions are especially vulnerable to habitat fragmentation. Mountain lions in Southern California and along the Central Coast are provisionally listed under the California Endangered Species Act. They are facing an extinction vortex driven by a lack of connectivity that is causing a deadly combination of genetic isolation and human-caused mortalities, including car strikes, rodenticide poisonings, disease, and wildfires.^{6,11,12} Dozens of organizations, including leading conservation and animal protection groups, support stronger protections [for mountain lions](#) and [wildlife connectivity](#).

Protecting mountain lions by preserving intact linkages and implementing wildlife crossing infrastructure would not only benefit mountain lions but also imperiled wildlife and plants that are the cornerstone of California's unique biodiversity. The presence of this wide-ranging top predator has been shown to help promote watershed health and maintain diverse habitats that support a multitude of fish, amphibian, reptile, bird, mammal, insect, and invertebrate species.^{13,14} Loss of the species could potentially lead to degraded ecosystems and decreased biodiversity.

Wildlife crossings are also needed for smaller, less mobile special-status species that travel through heterogenous habitats to find food, shelter, and mates, like imperiled California tiger salamanders, San Joaquin kit foxes, and desert tortoises. More crossings will contribute to the recovery of listed species and protect other species that are perceived as more common but are significantly impacted by roads, like California and rough-skinned newts – community scientists have [documented over 15,000 killed newts](#) on just four miles of road over a three-year period.

Building more wildlife crossings would benefit numerous sensitive animals and plants and improve driver safety. The wildlife-vehicle collisions reported in 2018 alone caused 314 instances of injury, an estimated 5 deaths, and over \$230 million in economic and social costs in California.¹⁵ Fortunately, removing wildlife connectivity barriers through installing wildlife passage features, such as underpasses, overpasses, and directional fencing, have proven to be a cost-effective means of reducing wildlife-vehicle collisions and facilitating wildlife movement.

Many states, including Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, New Mexico, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming have been proactively addressing wildlife connectivity issues and realizing the benefits of wildlife crossing infrastructure. Utah has documented a 98.5% reduction¹⁶ and Colorado has documented an 89% reduction¹⁷ in wildlife-vehicle collisions on sections of highways where they have implemented wildlife crossing infrastructure. Meanwhile, wildlife crossings along the I-90 Snoqualmie Pass in Washington have led to pikas establishing new territories, fish and benthic macroinvertebrates colonizing restored streams, and documented amphibian movement at new crossings and mitigation sites.

Actively pursuing these types of projects benefits wildlife, public safety, and the economy. Improved connectivity would also improve the ability of California's residents, plants, and animals to adapt to climate change.⁵

California can lead the nation in habitat connectivity planning. Setting aside funding to explicitly preserve and enhance wildlife connectivity is a critical step towards meeting the State's goals to protect biodiversity and improve climate resilience.

We thank you for your attention to this important issue and for considering this request.

Sincerely,

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Cc: The Honorable Gavin Newsom
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