Transportation Interim Committee – Wednesday, July 8th, 8:30 am Capitol Room 154 (Zoom)
FWP Briefing: Wildlife Crossings and HB 855 Implementation – 9:45 am

There are extensive research findings and literature on road ecology, wildlife mitigation siting and design, effectiveness, and cost-benefit analysis available (referencing Huisjer M., et al. herein). The goals of wildlife accommodations are typically two-fold: 1) reduce wildlife-vehicle conflicts/collisions and 2) improve connectivity and safe passage for wildlife moving across the transportation network. The evaluation and siting of appropriate mitigation strategies is very complex and includes a multitude of variables both on and beyond the highway itself. Mitigation strategies attempting to reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions (WVC) and provide improved wildlife passage can be grouped into four distinct categories, as follows:

- Physically separate animals from the roadway (80-99% effective)
- Influence driver behavior (0-87% effective)
- Influence animal behavior (0-variable% effective)
- Reduce wildlife population size (up to 80% effective)

Physically separating animals and roadway is the most effective and beneficial mitigation and typically uses structures (overpasses, underpasses). Crossing structures with wildlife exclusionary fencing and jump-outs (escape ramps) substantially reduce risk of WVC and provide the connectivity needed for wildlife to make necessary movements across the landscape.

Isolating animals from the highway with exclusionary fencing and jump-outs, without appropriate crossing structures, may improve driver safety, but creates a severe ecosystem barrier effect in preventing or altering animal movements within their movement corridors or range.

Influencing driver behavior can be effective but is highly dependent on driver response and proper project design. This strategy relies on the driver to adjust their driving (e.g., increase alertness, reduce speed) based on messaging received. Static “deer crossing” type signs are completely ineffective in reducing WVC and improving wildlife connectivity. Speed reductions can be moderately effective, but only in very specific and localized conditions, and can lead to other driver safety issues. Variable message signs can be effective in addressing seasonal conflicts (e.g., elk in fall/winter time) if activated during the right time only. Animal detection systems (ADS) can be highly effective when associated with fencing and at-grade crossing opportunities, as long as system design, animal detection and system activation, messaging, and driver response are appropriate. Technology in the field of ADS evolves rapidly and can require upgrade and maintenance to be fully effective over time.

Influencing animal behavior has not been found to be effective in reducing WVC and increasing connectivity for wildlife movement. These options typically include visual detractors (e.g., reflectors, mirrors, flagging), audio signals (e.g, deer whistles) and may also include hazing, de-icing alternatives, intercept feeding, or vegetation modification. These strategies are wrought with issues, require a great deal of maintenance and upkeep, and do not perform well and/or are undesirable to implement over the long-term.

Reducing wildlife populations (e.g. culling, translocation, habitat alteration adjacent to roadway, fertility repressors) would be highly controversial in MT, would interfere with wildlife management of game animals through hunt opportunity, would not be supportive of rare species conservation, and does not support our multi-species mandates. Research indicates that when implemented, these methods have only been used in states with extremely high white-tailed deer populations and little wildlife diversity and intact landscapes.

Wildlife accommodation features can be included in MDT highway projects through an internal workflow called the Wildlife Accommodation Process. The highway projects must include the appropriate scope for these recommendations to be considered. Stand-alone wildlife accommodation projects are not currently implemented through the transportation delivery program in Montana. These accommodations would typically be funded by FHWA/MDT and may include partner contributions.

Stand-alone wildlife accommodation projects can be brought to the Montana Wildlife & Transportation Partnership for evaluation and implementation. The partnership-developed Planning Tool shows areas of greatest need across the state intended to assist groups and communities focus their collaboration and resources in areas where wildlife mitigation is needed most. Project proponents are expected to bring the lion-share of the funding to the table, which typically includes reliance on a federal grant (e.g., Wildlife Crossing Pilot Program) with match provided by the proponent. MDT will fund project feasibility studies up to $500 annually. There are currently four projects in the partnership "hopper" awaiting a funding solution.

During the fall of 2025, the partnership embarked on a prioritization strategy plan wherein the partners can work to find funding solutions for the states highest priorities for wildlife accommodation projects. Phase I of this effort took information from the Planning Tool, filtered by top scores over the five needs assessment criteria (NAC) to produce focal areas. As we embark on Phase II, focal areas will be further refined through expert opinion and a secondary criteria matrix evaluation. Phase three will include field reviews of the top priorities, concept level scoping, and recommendations. The partnership and its many partners will embark on funding schemes for project development and implementation.

The 2025 legislature enacted two bills dedicated to wildlife accommodation project implementation in Montana. HB855 established a state special revenue account (SSRA) dedicated to wildlife transportation projects to be administered by FWP. Additionally, it required FWP to establish and sponsor a specialty license plate a $20 donation from each plate sold will be contributed to the SSRA. FWP in cooperation with Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership ran a license plate design contest and received over thirty submissions. A panel of judges including representatives, commissioners, and agency leadership selected a winner based on established criteria. Kylie Bute, a graduating senior (2025) from Gallatin High School won the design context with the design below. The license plate is available for purchase July 1.

The passing of HB932 in 2025 transfers 5% of the habitat legacy account (~ $500,000 annually) to the SSRA created through HB855. FWP administers the wildlife crossing account per 87-1-627.