

May 23, 2022

Speaker Anthony Renden

Speaker, California State Assembly

Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: AB 2344 Safe Roads & Wildlife Protection Act – SUPPORT

Dear Speaker Renden,

I am writing to express my support for the Safe Roads & Wildlife Protection Act (AB 2344, Friedman & Kalra), which seeks to improve safety for people and wildlife by protecting and enhancing wildlife connectivity across California's highway system. I believe the Act is a necessary step towards improved travel for both motorists and wildlife because it would (1) direct California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) and Caltrans to develop a Wildlife Connectivity Action Plan to inform the strategic implementation of wildlife crossings; (2) establish a Wildlife Connectivity Project List that identifies priority wildlife crossing projects statewide; and (3) require Caltrans to address and remediate barriers to wildlife in ongoing projects. This legislation is necessary to protect California's imperiled biodiversity and undo the harms of fragmentation largely caused by the state highway system.

Many of California's most iconic native species, including mountain lions, bobcats, California tiger salamanders, Quino checkerspot butterflies, desert tortoises, black bears, and coastal California gnatcatchers, face an existential threat due to their inability to disperse throughout their range. In addition to direct mortalities from collisions with motorists, roads can prevent animals from finding food, shelter and mates; escaping and recovering from severe events like wildfires or floods; or adapting to shifts in resource availability caused by climate change. Such barriers to movement can result in high levels of inbreeding and genetic isolation and increased risk of local extinction.

Lack of connectivity is the primary threat for many imperiled species and populations, including Southern California and Central Coast mountain lion populations, which are provisionally listed as threatened under the state endangered species act. Humans have extended roads and development into mountain lion habitat with little regard to their movement needs, which has resulted in dangerously isolated populations with poor genetic health and high levels of human-caused mortalities, including car strikes, depredation kills, rodenticide poisonings, poaching, and disease. The Santa Ana and Santa Monica cougar populations are facing an "extinction vortex," and scientists predict that these populations could become extinct within decades if nothing is done to preserve remaining intact habitat and enhance connectivity. Other populations including those in the Santa Cruz, San Gabriel, and San Bernardino mountains, are showing similar patterns.

Wildlife-vehicle collisions can occur when animals are forced to cross roads and highways that lack wildlife crossing infrastructure. Motorists often suffer property damage, injury, and death from collisions with wildlife. 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 to Californians. This is likely a low estimate because many wildlife-vehicle collisions go unreported. One study in Virginia found deer roadkill to be up to 8.5 times higher than what was documented in police crash reports, and State Farm Insurance estimates deer collision claims in California to be 3 times higher than the numbers recorded by the California Highway Patrol and community scientists. In addition to underreported wildlife-vehicle collisions, animals are also undercounted because they may survive the crash only to die from their injuries away from the road. Fortunately, removing wildlife connectivity barriers by installing wildlife passage features, such as underpasses, overpasses, and directional fencing, have proven to be cost-effective means of reducing wildlife-vehicle collisions and facilitating wildlife movement.

However, California's existing policies addressing barriers to wildlife movement lack coordination, and the available bond funds are not enough to adequately address the threats to motorists and wildlife statewide. Current law only includes a policy to promote the "voluntary protection" of wildlife connectivity. Caltrans' Advance Mitigation Program is rarely utilized to fund and implement wildlife passage features. The California Environmental Quality Act, as applied and interpreted, has not resulted in adequate consideration and mitigation of the impacts of roads and highways on wildlife connectivity. The failure to incorporate features that allow wildlife to safely cross state highways has led to increasing imperilment of California's rich biodiversity.

I believe this legislation proactively addresses the gaps in coordination, information, and implementation necessary to protect California's wildlife in several ways. First, the Act creates a Wildlife Connectivity Action Plan that builds off existing resources, such as the California Essential Habitat Connectivity Project, to identify roads or portions of roads that impede important wildlife movement and have a high rate of wildlife-vehicle collisions. This plan also requires Caltrans and CDFW to develop needed protocols to monitor roadkill and wildlife movement, compile wildlife-vehicle collision data from multiple sources, assess opportunities to work with Native American tribes, and identify areas requiring additional monitoring or research.

The Act also requires Caltrans and CDFW to develop a Wildlife Connectivity Project List to prioritize projects that address the most dangerous wildlife-vehicle collision hotspots and enhance important wildlife movement. Identifying specific priority projects will be a critical preliminary step to coordinating and implementing effective crossing infrastructure (through advance mitigation or otherwise) in areas of the state highways that pose a safety risk to wildlife and motorists alike.

Finally, the Act requires Caltrans to incorporate wildlife passage features into the designs of road projects that overlap with areas designated in the Wildlife Connectivity Action Plan as important areas for wildlife connectivity or roadkill hotspots.

Bold state action to ensure wildlife connectivity is critical for biodiversity resilience and climate change adaptability. Incorporating crossing infrastructure into our state highway system will give California's iconic wildlife, like mountain lions, desert tortoises, and California tiger salamanders, a fighting chance to survive and recover. Wildlife connectivity also is essential to meet the state's goals of conserving at least 30% of California's land and coastal waters by 2030 in a manner that protects and restores biodiversity and builds climate resilience.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue. We thank the authors and the **committee** for considering this vital bill.

Sincerely,

Mari Galloway
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Wildlands Network

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