



Media contacts:

- Jeremy Austin, Wild Lands & Water Program Director, Central Oregon LandWatch, jeremy@colw.org 541-647-2930, x803
- Rachel Wheat, Wildlife Connectivity Coordinator, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Rachel.E.WHEAT@odfw.oregon.gov 503-947-6141
- Cidney Bowman, Wildlife Passage Coordinator, Oregon Department of Transportation, cidney.N.BOWMAN@odot.oregon.gov 503-930-3352
- Lace Thornberg, Communications Director, Central Oregon LandWatch, lance@colw.org 541.647.2930, x802

For release: April 23, 2025

A Million Steps Closer to Reconnected Habitat

A coalition working on constructing wildlife crossings over Highway 20 reaches key milestone

BEND, Ore.— As spring thaws the Central Cascades, a herd of roughly 250 elk are embarking on their seasonal migration between winter and summer range. From lower elevations around Lake Billy Chinook, these elk are headed westbound, into the Deschutes National Forest along the base of Black Butte, eventually arriving on their summer range near the base of Mount Washington.

Highway 20 bisects this migratory corridor, and the stretch of highway between Suttle Lake and Bend sees the highest density of deer and elk wildlife-vehicle collisions in the state — with 350 to 600 mule deer and elk killed each year by vehicle strikes.

The Bend to Suttle Lake Wildlife Passage Initiative is restoring habitat connectivity and addressing this dangerous situation for wildlife and people alike through the construction of new, strategically located wildlife crossings. **With the recent award of \$688,800 from the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, the coalition has reached a critical fundraising milestone and secured the money needed to apply for federal matching funds for phase two of the project — engineering and design of four crossing structures.**

The OWEB grant brings the total project funding raised to just over \$1 million, with other key grants coming from The Roundhouse Foundation, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Oregon Hunters Association, Oregon Wildlife Foundation, and the Oregon Conservation and Recreation Fund.

Formed in 2022, the Bend to Suttle Lake Wildlife Passage Initiative is a group of state and federal agencies, nonprofits, landowners, and institutions with the expertise, relationships, and regulatory authority necessary to address this critical safety and connectivity issue. Central Oregon LandWatch manages the project and coalition, in partnership with the Oregon Wildlife Foundation, the fiscal sponsor.

“At the heart of the Bend to Suttle Lake Wildlife Passage Initiative is the broad partnership that has coalesced around the shared goal of improving wildlife passage and motorist safety along this 35 miles of Highway 20 here in Central Oregon. From all the coalition partners, we are extremely grateful that this shared goal has resonated with funders across the state; their support is crucial to sustaining the incredible momentum of the initiative,” said Jeremy Austin, Wild Lands & Waters Program Director at Central Oregon LandWatch.

In July 2024, the coalition completed a feasibility study which identified eleven potential locations for wildlife crossing structures between Bend and Suttle Lake. The group then prioritized four sites for





construction based on wildlife-vehicle collision densities, value to migrating wildlife, and proximity to publicly owned lands and other crossing locations.

“Highway 20 is a formidable barrier for wildlife. Animals trying to cross the highway risk injury or death, and this risk is increasing as more people choose to live and recreate in Central Oregon. A wide diversity of species, large and small, need to cross Highway 20 to access food, water, shelter, and other resources,” said Rachel Wheat, Wildlife Connectivity Coordinator, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

With the feasibility study completed, the Bend to Suttle Lake Wildlife Passage Initiative set its sights on raising \$852,000 through state and private contributions in order to apply for federal funds which require a non-federal match.

“This initiative comes at a pivotal moment when we are working hard to maintain significant momentum in support of wildlife crossings, both at the state and federal levels. As this project progresses, we are well-positioned to leverage broad-based support and funding to improve habitat connectivity and safety for wildlife and motorists alike,” said Tristan Henry, Oregon Field Representative for the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership.

There are several sources of federal funding for wildlife crossing infrastructure, including \$350 million in the Wildlife Crossings Pilot Program that was part of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law in 2021.

“The Initiative is well poised for success in applying for federal funding this summer. While there is a great deal of uncertainty around federal funding overall, our coalition remains optimistic that funding for this work will continue as wildlife crossings have a long history of bi-partisan support at the federal level, including under the past two administrations,” said Tim Greseth, Executive Director at the Oregon Wildlife Foundation.

Cidney Bowman, Wildlife Passage Coordinator for Oregon Department of Transportation, is excited about the work ahead. She notes, “ODOT now has agreements in place to move forward with engineering and design of the four crossing structures with a project team kicking off later this month to define next steps.”

“The frequency of wildlife-vehicle collisions on Highway 20 is a significant concern for Black Butte Ranch residents and guests. Many of us have either experienced these accidents firsthand or know someone who has. We appreciate the efforts being made to enhance safety for both humans and wildlife in Central Oregon,” said Jacob Derksen, Black Butte Ranch Natural Resources Manager.

Any agencies, businesses, or individuals interested in contributing to this project can contact the Oregon Wildlife Foundation. Individuals interested in contributing can do so online at bit.ly/Donate2Bend2Suttle.

The Bend to Suttle Lake Wildlife Passage Initiative coalition includes the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Oregon Department of Transportation, U.S. Forest Service - Deschutes National Forest, Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, Branch of Natural Resources, Central Oregon LandWatch, Oregon Wildlife Foundation, Oregon Hunters Association, Wildlands Network, Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, Pew Charitable Trust, Friends of the Metolius, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, The Nature Conservancy, Deschutes Land Trust, Protect Animal Migration & Movement, Black Butte Conservancy, Black Butte Ranch, and Oregon State University - Cascades.

For more information, visit bend2suttlelakepassage.org.

###

