
Transportation Committee

HB 2456

Brief Description: Ensuring connectivity for Washington wildlife through safe passages.

Sponsors: Representatives Timmons, Berry, Doglio, Walen, Ramel, Santos and Pollet.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Requires the Department of Transportation (WSDOT) and the Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) to establish the Washington Wildlife Habitat Connectivity Alliance, by no later than June 30, 2025.
- Creates the Washington Wildlife Corridors Account and the Washington Wildlife Crossings Account in the State Treasury, defines use of the authorized accounts, and allows these accounts to retain their earnings.
- Establishes requirements for the WSDOT, the WDFW, other relevant state and federal agencies, tribes, and other interested stakeholders to implement and update the Washington Wildlife Habitat Connectivity Action Plan.

Hearing Date: 1/29/24

Staff: David Munnecke (786-7315).

Background:

Vehicle-Wildlife Collisions.

On average, the Department of Transportation (WSDOT) receives 1,500 reports from law enforcement each year for wildlife-vehicle collisions. Wildlife carcass removal by the WSDOT suggests that a minimum of 5,000 collisions with deer and 200 collisions with elk occur each year, and collisions also occur with other large mammals and smaller wildlife such as raccoons, snakes, and squirrels. The WSDOT uses tactics such as wildlife fencing, crossings, and median

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barriers to encourage animals to stay off highways.

Habitat Connectivity.

The degree to which the landscape facilitates or impedes wildlife movement across the landscape is known as habitat connectivity. Wildlife need to move through the landscape for a variety of reasons, including food, protective cover, and in response to seasonal conditions. The WSDOT has partnered with the Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) and other stakeholders on a statewide habitat connectivity assessment, which identified areas where wildlife require movement across highways, and the findings from this partnership have informed the WSDOT's projects statewide.

Connectivity Funding.

The 2021 federal Bipartisan Infrastructure Law provided \$350 million for the Wildlife Crossings Pilot Program (WCPP), which provides funding for projects that seek to protect motorists and wildlife by reducing collisions and improving habitat connectivity. In creating the WCPP, Congress found that there are more than 1 million collisions between vehicles and wildlife annually, which present a danger to human safety and wildlife survival, cost over \$8 billion, and result in approximately tens of thousands of serious injuries and hundreds of fatalities on US roadways.

Treasury Income Account.

The Treasury Income Account (Account) is used to hold the earnings of investments of surplus balances from various accounts and funds of the State Treasury. Monthly, the State Treasurer distributes interest earnings credited in the Account to the General Fund. There are specific exceptions in which the interest earnings are not distributed to the General Fund, but are distributed to certain listed accounts and funds based upon each account's and fund's proportionate share of the average daily balance for the monthly period.

Summary of Bill:

Wildlife Habitat Connectivity Alliance and Wildlife Action Plan.

The WSDOT must enter into a memorandum of understanding with the WDFW no later than June 30, 2025, to establish the Washington Wildlife Habitat Connectivity Alliance (Alliance). The objectives of the Alliance are to bring together a variety of partners to advance projects that provide safe passage for wildlife and motorists, while enhancing or maintaining connectivity for wildlife. The memorandum of understanding must include the following elements:

- development of expectations regarding collaboration;
- establishment of an interagency steering committee;
- hiring of a third-party facilitator to guide operations;
- a plan for mobilizing stakeholder participation and outreach; and
- identification of efforts needed to build the framework for implementing the Washington Wildlife Habitat Connectivity Action Plan (Action Plan).

The WSDOT must work with the WDFW, other relevant state and federal agencies, tribes, and

interested stakeholders to implement and update the Action Plan. Estimates of preliminary costs, staffing needs, and federal grant funding that may be available for implementation of the Action Plan must be prepared by the WSDOT and reported to the Legislature. The WSDOT must also include wildlife connectivity considerations in fish passage projects and include the estimated cost of such in its biennial budget requests.

The WDFW must take the following actions to implement the Action Plan:

- develop strategies for habitat protection and restoration in priority corridors through various actions;
- update the Action Plan every six years through the incorporation of new information and stakeholder consultation; and
- prepare biennial reports to the Legislature on implementation of the Action Plan and associated funding needs.

Washington Wildlife Corridors and Washington Wildlife Crossings Accounts.

The Washington Wildlife Corridors Account and the Washington Wildlife Crossings Account are created in the State Treasury for use by the WDFW and the WSDOT, respectively. The WDFW is authorized to use funds from the Washington Wildlife Corridors Account for implementation of strategic activities that promote the protection and management of wildlife corridors identified in the Action Plan, which includes various enumerated activities. The WSDOT is authorized to use funds from the Washington Wildlife Crossings Account for the design, construction, identification, restoration, and protection of wildlife crossings and other highway features to reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions, which includes various enumerated activities. The WSDOT and the WDFW must report on expenditures from their respective accounts and how the expenditures have furthered the Action Plan by June 30th of each even-numbered year beginning in 2026.

The Washington Wildlife Corridors and the Washington Wildlife Crossings accounts are added to the list of accounts that receive interest earnings monthly from the Account.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date: The bill contains multiple effective dates. Please see the bill.