

Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20590

May 20, 2021

Dear Secretary Buttigieg,

Transportation across the West is a complex and varied issue but is uniquely intertwined with the values Westerners hold dear. Large, open landscapes filled with abundant native wildlife are a reason that many of us live here. We the undersigned organizations and experts would like to bring to your attention the need in Western communities to provide for safe travel for humans but also, for the wildlife that we share this landscape with. Grizzly bears are currently found in isolated populations in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) and the Yellowstone Ecosystem, but are struggling to find their way to the Selkirk, Cabinet-Yaak, Bitterroot, and North Cascades ecosystems of western Montana, Idaho, and Washington. These regions have been designated as areas where grizzlies will need to exist in order for full recovery of the species to be accomplished. Genetic exchange is a vital component of grizzly bear recovery and ensuring populations from each regional recovery area can co-mingle requires secure landscape-level linkage zones.

Worldwide, wildlife crossings are saving the lives of both people and animals. These over- and underpasses provide not only safety, but an important component both ecologically and biologically for wildlife in connecting habitats, diminishing inbreeding, and providing for proper genetic exchange. Numerous investigations have identified the most important areas and roads for wildlife crossings. These areas mostly consist of major transportation corridors typified by heavily-trafficked highways and higher densities of human occupancy – notably along the Highway 2/Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) corridor through the Continental Divide and Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystems; the Highway 200/Montana Rail Link corridor along the southwestern margin of the Cabinet Mountains; Highway 93 through Flathead, Mission, and Bitterroot Valleys along the west side of the NCDE and east side of the Selway-Bitterroot Ecosystem; and, most especially, Interstate Highway 90 (I-90), separating the Northern Continental Divide, Cabinet-Yaak, and Selkirk Ecosystems to the north from the Greater Yellowstone and Selway-Bitterroot Ecosystems to the south.^{1,2}

A recent report compiled by grizzly bear biologist David J. Mattson entitled [The Grizzly Bear Promised Land: Past, Present & Future of Grizzly Bears in the Bitterroot, Clearwater, Salmon & Selway Country](#), highlights the challenges that grizzly bears encounter when attempting to

¹ Mattson, D. 2021. The Grizzly Bear Promised Land: Past, Present & Future of Grizzly Bears in the Bitterroot, Clearwater, Salmon & Selway Country. Livingston, MT.

² Rutherford, A., Ellis, C., McGowen, P., McClure, M., Ament, R., & Grebenc, J. 2014. Highway mitigation for wildlife in northwest Montana. Sonoran Institute, Northern Rockies Office, Bozeman, Montana.

disperse to recovery areas. Specifically, it addresses where spatial and temporal barriers to grizzly bear dispersal from major highways exist.

Along with this report from Dr. Mattson, a biological opinion authored by a Confederated Salish Kootenai Tribes biologist and the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks outlines the importance of wildlife crossings west of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem including many proposed wildlife crossings on U.S. Highway 93 from Evaro to Polson, Montana. Over 50,000 wildlife uses have been recorded involving more than 30 species – including grizzlies – in the past 12 years on the existing crossings but more are needed as grizzlies and other wildlife continue to be killed and the number of cars traveling on the highway increases.³ Dispersal west out of the NCDE to other ecosystems will require safe travel of bears across roadways. Without these structures, we can expect grizzly recovery to take many decades longer than it otherwise should.

The U.S. Department of Transportation can be a major driver of wildlife conservation by making wildlife crossings throughout the west a priority for funding, either through existing funding mechanisms built into appropriations or through requests from the Administration to Congress for dedicated funds. Without a concerted effort from the DOT, states will lack the proper resources needed to ensure these important structures are included in infrastructure upgrades or new construction. As the Biden Administration is preparing for investing in infrastructure nationwide, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming are home to some of the longest migration routes and charismatic wildlife in the country. What we do now will determine if these animals persist into the future. Congress has already shown dedication to include provisions for wildlife crossings in both the House and the Senate. These bipartisan bills have been supported by wildlife advocacy groups, sportsmen’s groups, and states alike. We are looking forward to new bills being introduced soon with bipartisan support. Providing the resources and money necessary to connect habitats for wildlife saves both human and wildlife lives and is a win-win for everyone.

We would invite you to visit Montana to tour some of the wildlife crossings that have proven successful and to see how these structures can further grizzly bear recovery.



³ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2020. Endangered Species Act Section 7 Consultation Biological Opinion on the Revised US 93 Evaro to Polson N-H 5-2(159)37; UPN 8008000. Helena, MT.

Sincerely,

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