

May 10, 2021

Colorado General Assembly

Colorado State Capitol
200 E Colfax Ave, #091
Denver, CO 80203

RE: Habitat Connectivity in Colorado

Dear Colorado General Assembly:

I request that you join me and Rep Perry Will in affirming Colorado's commitment to enhancing ecological connectivity, habitat protection, and healthy landscapes. Responsibly stewarding Colorado's tremendous biodiversity—and the ecological, social, and economic benefits it provides—requires maintaining, restoring, and enhancing connectivity within and between vital landscapes. Our diverse array of habitats, from prairie grasslands to alpine tundra, support some of the largest wildlife populations in North America and attract residents and tourists alike. While Colorado has established itself as a leader in habitat connectivity policy, further action is necessary to protect our rich natural heritage for future generations.

As Colorado's population continues to grow, as development continues to expand and intensify, and as the climate continues to change, the majestic landscapes that define our state's character are becoming increasingly fragmented and degraded. When these habitats become isolated, wildlife populations and biodiversity decline. For instance, habitat fragmentation is a major reason that the state's mule deer herds have plummeted from an estimated 600,000 individuals in 2006 to fewer than 400,000 in 2013, and today remain well below their population objectives. These trends are causing widespread concern from diverse stakeholders and constituents throughout the state. Although mule deer are one of the more visible examples, similar downward trends are occurring for other species as well.

In order to survive and thrive, native fish, wildlife, and plants need to move freely across the landscape. Isolated islands of protected areas are not capable of sustaining these species in the long term. In order to reach food, water, and mates, and to survive harsh seasonal weather, species need natural areas that connect patches of intact habitat. These corridors facilitate critical ecological processes and natural movements, including seasonal migrations, dispersal to new territories, and species range shifts.

Many of Colorado's iconic wildlife—including moose, elk, deer, and pronghorn, as well as non-game species such as the boreal toad, greenback cutthroat trout, and Canada lynx—depend on intact seasonal habitats and the migratory routes that connect them. Healthy and resilient wildlife populations, as well as connected natural landscapes, create unique outdoor recreation

opportunities in Colorado. As a result, our recreation economy generates \$62.5 billion in economic output, \$9.4 billion in local and state tax revenue, and supports 511,000 jobs.

Wildlife corridors also benefit both human and ecological communities by providing valuable ecosystem services, such as pollination, erosion control, and air and water purification. Additionally, by sequestering carbon, regulating stream flow, and offering flood protection, corridors increase the climate resilience of our communities and ecosystems. Moreover, where wildlife corridors intersect with highways, building wildlife crossing structures that go over or under roadways will improve human and wildlife safety by reducing costly and devastating motorist collisions involving wildlife.

Colorado's government has long recognized the need to address habitat fragmentation and improve habitat connectivity. Back in 2006, Colorado authorized a Wildlife Habitat Stamp, which has generated the funds to protect 253,000 acres of prime wildlife habitat, with priority given to winter range and migration corridors under C.R.S. 33-4-102.7. In 2010, the legislature moved to reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions through the Wildlife Crossing Zones Act. In addition to these legislative efforts, state agencies have worked together to integrate wildlife movements into Colorado's transportation system. For example, Colorado Parks and Wildlife and Colorado Department of Transportation jointly convened a Wildlife Transportation Summit in 2017, established the Colorado Wildlife Transportation Alliance in 2018, and are currently coordinating to implement Governor Polis's Executive Order D-2019-11, "Conserving Colorado's Big Game Winter Range and Migration Corridors." Due to demand for additional action at the local level, counties have formed "safe passage" coalitions of government agencies and non-governmental organizations to integrate habitat connectivity and highway mitigation for wildlife into land use policies, planning, and on-the-ground projects. The majority of these state and local government actions thus far have focused on reducing habitat fragmentation and migratory barriers associated with transportation infrastructure in specific locations. While incredibly beneficial, these actions are only part of the puzzle. In order to advance habitat connectivity statewide, we need a comprehensive, landscape-scale, ecosystem-based approach.

It is time to build upon Colorado's record of successfully creating safe passage for fish and wildlife. We must now protect and restore corridors that facilitate movement throughout whole landscapes—not just across roads. Indeed, in Colorado Parks and Wildlife's 2020 Status Report on Big Game Winter Range Migration Corridors, the agency highlighted the need to invest in landscape-scale analyses of the physical barriers, land use practices, and climatic changes that threaten migration corridors and seasonal habitat. Coordinating cross-jurisdictional efforts to increase connectivity within and between entire ecosystems will allow Colorado to reap the full suite of benefits that flow from well-connected habitats: robust wildlife populations, valuable ecosystem services, thriving economies, and healthy communities. The merits of this approach have already been recognized legislatively at the federal level in the recently introduced Wildlife

Corridors Conservation Act and the Tribal Wildlife Corridors Act, which mandate coordinated landscape connectivity planning and management across jurisdictions.

We, the General Assembly, are poised to lead the nation in habitat connectivity conservation by protecting ecological corridors at the landscape scale. Now is the time to commit to new measures to enhance the natural networks and pathways that sustain our state's wildlife heritage, outdoor economy, and vibrant ecosystems.

Sincerely,

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| Rep. Perry Will | Sen. Jessie Danielson |
| Rep. Shannon Bird | Rep. Yadira Caraveo |
| Rep. Lisa Cutter | Sen. Joann Ginal |
| Senator Chris Hansen | Rep. Dominique Jackson |
| Rep. Chris Kennedy | Rep. Kathy Kipp |
| Sen. Brittany Pettersen | Rep. Dylan Roberts |
| Rep. Emily Sirota | Rep. Brianna Titone |
| Rep. Alex Valdez | Rep. Donald Valdez |
| Rep. Mike Weissman | Rep. Steven Woodrow |