

Require Collaboration on Big Game Migration Corridors and Habitats

Big game populations across North America move between summer and winter habitats. The quality of each habitat and the ability to move between them is a fundamental element in the ecology and management of mule deer, pronghorn, elk, bighorn sheep, moose, and others. Advancements in wildlife tracking technology have allowed researchers to document the importance and location of migration in the West. In addition, identification of big game “stopovers” – areas along migration corridors where animals spend significant time foraging and resting between movements – has allowed managers to focus conservation efforts on these vital habitats as well.

At the same time, an increasing human population across the western U.S. has expanded housing, industrial development, and transportation infrastructure now interposed with seasonal habitats and migratory pathways of big game species. Increased vehicle traffic has caused more wildlife-vehicle collisions and direct mortality of big game along traditional migration corridors. Even in areas without development, habitat quality on seasonal ranges has deteriorated due to invasive species, wildfires, overgrowth of non-forage vegetation, and other issues, all of which can result in declining populations.

Department of the Interior Secretarial Order 3362 (SO 3362), signed in February 2018, has helped direct broad engagement and focus on the challenge of researching, managing, and conserving big game migration corridors and seasonal habitats. In addition, the Western Governors’ Association (WGA) passed a resolution in June 2019 supporting the conservation and state-led management of wildlife migration corridors. This resolution also calls on federal agencies to support locally developed initiatives to conserve migration corridors and habitat.

Continued and expanded collaboration on this issue will enhance efforts of state and federal agencies and non-profit conservation organizations that are beginning to make significant progress on these challenges.



Improve Transportation Planning to Reduce Wildlife-Vehicle Collisions

- Support passage of a federal highway bill with new innovative provisions to address wildlife corridor/transportation conflicts, specifically the Wildlife Crossings Pilot Program in Section 1125 and the Wildlife-Vehicle Collision Research in Section 3007 of the *America's Transportation Infrastructure Act of 2019* (S.2302). Congress
- Develop a priority project list in coordination with state transportation and wildlife agencies for wildlife-vehicle collision reduction and improvement of habitat connectivity. Interior/all bureaus; Agriculture/FS; Transportation/FHA

Every state has named increasing traffic volumes on highways as a primary issue impacting conservation of big game and other wildlife species. These animals face direct impacts such as wildlife-vehicle collisions and loss and fragmentation of habitat, along with indirect impacts through habitat avoidance and altered or lost migrations. Across the West, properly constructed infrastructure such as highway overpasses and underpasses designed for wildlife crossings have reduced mortality by as much as 80 percent. Recently funded migration studies (via SO 3362) are helping to identify important migration intersections with highways and roads to inform wildlife crossing placement.

While the current highway bill allows for the use of federal funds for fish and wildlife crossings, there are no guarantees that state departments of transportation will prioritize such projects or that these projects will be integrated into the Federal Highway Administration's (FHA) priorities. As such, there is a clear need for dedicated federal funding and federal agency direction



to advance construction of fish and wildlife crossing infrastructure on the ground and in the next highway bill. Equally important to federal funding is coordination between wildlife and state/federal transportation agencies to resolve the impact of highway infrastructure and traffic on big game and other wildlife movement. While administrative flexibility for such coordination exists, it is not exercised often. Without such support, coordination, and action, wildlife managers are at a disadvantage in applying results of their research to conserve corridors and wildlife species for future generations.

Federal-State Coordination

- Establish a permanent program based on DOI Secretarial Order 3362, with assigned staff and adequate funding for research and implementation by federal and state agencies. Congress; Interior/all bureaus
- Develop a companion effort to SO 3362 at the U.S. Department of Agriculture through the U.S. Forest Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service. Agriculture/FS, NRCS
- Establish a Wildlife Corridors Grant Program to provide matching funds for states and tribes to re-connect wildlife corridors through voluntary partnerships with private landowners, ranchers, farmers, and other stakeholders. Congress

Both state and federal governments recognize not only the need but also the challenge of conserving big game migration corridors across the West. Secretarial Order (SO) 3362 provided a critical infusion of resources for states to gather additional information on big game migration and to implement measures designed to conserve migratory corridors and improve winter range condition. In addition, federal funding has been leveraged for habitat restoration in migration corridors and seasonal ranges identified in the SO 3362 State Action Plans. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Shared Stewardship vision is based on the same principles, and the USFS administers much of the big game summer

range habitat in the U.S. The process of coordination between DOI, USDA, and the states has only just begun as significant new state data on seasonal big game migrations now is starting to emerge.

The Administration should support recent federal and state policies and recommendations set forth by SO 3362 and the WGA resolution. This includes substantive funding and continued coordination for federal land management agencies to conserve or restore state-identified migration corridors and seasonal habitats and to collaborate with state agencies to implement management efforts.



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