

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 6237

As of January 23, 2024

Title: An act relating to ensuring connectivity for Washington wildlife through safe passages.

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

Sponsors: Senators Salomon, Shewmake, Hasegawa, Lias, Nobles, Randall, Valdez and Wilson, J..

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Transportation: 1/23/24.

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 and defines authorized account uses.
- Establishes requirements for WSDOT, WDFW, other relevant state and federal agencies, tribes, and other interested stakeholders to plan and implement the Washington Wildlife Habitat Connectivity Action Plan.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION

Staff: Megan Tudor (786-7478)

Background: Washington Department of Transportation. In 1977, the Department of Transportation (WSDOT) was established as the central governing body for Washington's transportation functions. WSDOT's mission is to provide safe, reliable and cost-effective transportation options to improve communities and economic vitality for people and

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businesses.

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. The Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) was created in 1890 to preserve, protect, and perpetuate the state's fish, wildlife, and ecosystems while providing sustainable fish and wildlife recreational and commercial opportunities.

Vehicle-Wildlife Collisions. On average, WSDOT receives 1500 reports each year for wildlife-vehicle collisions. Based on tracking of wildlife carcass removal, these numbers suggest that a minimum of 5000 collisions with deer and 200 collisions with elk occur each year. Collisions also occur with other large mammals and smaller wildlife like raccoons, snakes, and salamanders. WSDOT uses tactics such as wildlife fencing, crossings, and median barriers to encourage animals to stay off highways. An estimated 1 to 2 million wildlife-vehicle collisions occur every year nationwide incurring at least \$8 billion in property damage and other costs.

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 to fulfill daily or periodic foraging needs, access breeding resources or water, or escape predation. An example of wildlife movement is seasonal migration where wildlife move between summer and wintering grounds or to seasonal breeding areas. WSDOT partnered with WDFW and other stakeholders on a statewide habitat connectivity assessment that identified areas where wildlife require movement across highways and their findings have informed WSDOT projects statewide.

Treasury Income Account. The Treasury Income 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 Treasury Income 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: Legislative Intent. The Legislature states intent to direct WSDOT and WDFW, in cooperation with other state agencies, as needed, to identify and protect wildlife habitat connectivity corridors and build appropriate crossing structures to reduce wildlife vehicle collisions.

Wildlife Habitat Connectivity Alliance and Wildlife Action Plan. WSDOT must enter into a memorandum of understanding with WDFW no later than June 30, 2025, to establish the Washington Wildlife Habitat Connectivity Alliance (Alliance). The Alliance will accomplish objectives to bring diverse partners together to advance projects that provide safe passage for wildlife and motorists while enhancing or maintaining connectivity for wildlife. The memorandum of understanding must include, but is not limited to the

development of expectations, establishment of an interagency steering committee, and identification of efforts needed to build the structure for the Washington Wildlife Habitat Connectivity Action Plan (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 WSDOT. The bill outlines required actions WDFW must take to implement the Action Plan.

Wildlife Corridors and Crossings Accounts. The Washington Wildlife Corridors account and the Washington Wildlife Crossings account are created in the state Treasury for use by WDFW and WSDOT, respectively. The authorized uses for each account are defined. Both accounts must report on expenditures and how the expenditures have furthered the Action Plan by June 30th of each even-numbered year beginning in 2026.

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

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on January 16, 2024.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: Every year cars kill thousands of deer and elk as well as many smaller animals, costing the state around \$74 million in losses. An effective method for decreasing wildlife-vehicle collisions is with wildlife crossings, which have reduced collisions on I-90 by 90 percent.

In the provisions of the bill, the Department of Transportation and the Department of Fish and Wildlife are directed to develop a cooperative team to study methods of addressing habitat connectivity and implementation of wildlife crossings.

As the climate changes, connectivity is necessary for wildlife to be able to adapt to the changing environment. Research suggests that one of the most important things we can do to ensure healthy ecosystems for wildlife and people is to create habitat connectivity. This bill is mutually beneficial for both people and wildlife. This bill puts the state in a better position to apply for federal grants that support habitat connectivity planning and projects.

OTHER: Last session the Legislature funded the Department of Fish and Wildlife to develop the connectivity action plan, this bill is necessary for supporting the implementation of that plan. The Department of Transportation will provide recommendations for updates to the bill in partnership with the other agencies and

stakeholders.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator Jesse Salomon, Prime Sponsor; Julia Michalak, WDFW; John Rosapepe, Endangered Species Coalition; Paula Swedeen, Conservation Northwest; David Ellenberger, Wildlands Network; Robert Long, Woodland Park Zoo; Kathleen Callaghy, Defenders of Wildlife.

OTHER: Ahmer Nizam, Washington State Department of Transportation.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: No one.