SENATE BILL REPORT
SB 5203

As of January 25, 2025

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, Cortes, Hasegawa, Liias and Nobles.

Brief History:
Committee Activity: Transportation: 1/27/25.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Requires the Department of Transportation and the Department of Fish and Wildlife to develop an integrated Wildlife Habitat Connectivity Strategy to implement the Washington Wildlife Habitat Connectivity Action Plan.
- Creates the Washington Wildlife Corridors Account and the Washington Wildlife Crossings Account in the state Treasury and defines authorized uses for each account.
- Requires periodic reporting on expenditures from the accounts, implementation of the action plan, and additional funding needs.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION

Staff: Daniel Masterson (786-7454)

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 businesses.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

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. It is estimated that 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: Integrated Wildlife Habitat Connectivity Strategy and Wildlife Action Plan. WSDOT and WDFW must develop an Integrated Wildlife Habitat Connectivity Strategy (Integrated Strategy) to implement and periodically update the Washington Wildlife Habitat Connectivity Action Plan (Action Plan). When developing the Integrated Strategy, WSDOT and WDFW must consult with tribal governments, federal agencies, nongovernmental partners, and academia. The Integrated Strategy should advance projects that provide safe passage for wildlife and the traveling public while enhancing or maintaining connectivity for wildlife. The Integrated Strategy must establish a framework for prioritization, oversight, and funding recommendations for implementation of the Action Plan.

WDFW is given additional planning and reporting requirements related to implementing the

Action Plan.

Wildlife Corridors and Wildlife Crossings Accounts. The Washington Wildlife Corridors Account and the Washington Wildlife Crossings Account are created in the state Treasury and money in these accounts may only be spent after appropriation.

The Washington Wildlife Corridors Account may be used to fund implementation of strategic activities that promote the protection and management of wildlife corridors as identified in the Action Plan including the purchase of land, landowner assistance programs, and updates to the Action Plan.

The Washington Wildlife Crossings Account may be used to fund the design, construction, identification, restoration, and protection of wildlife crossings and other highway features to reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions and habitat fragmentation.

WSDOT and WDFW must report on each account by June 30th of each even-numbered year to the appropriate committees of the Legislature and the Governor's Office. Additionally, the Wildlife Corridors Account Report must be submitted to the Fish and Wildlife Commission. The reports must include information on the expenditures from the accounts, how expenditures have furthered the Action Plan, estimates of preliminary costs, staffing needs, and federal grant funding that may be available to implement the Action Plan.

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 13, 2025.

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

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