

American Wildlands' Safe Passage Program

System-wide Problem Analysis, Policy Reform, and Project Planning to Address the Impact of Highways on Wildlife

American Wildlands seeks \$[REDACTED] from the Turner Foundation in support of our organizational mission of restoring and protecting habitat connectivity for wildlife, by focusing on wildlife needs for movement across transportation routes in the U.S. Northern Rockies. Our *Safe Passages* program facilitates this mission by focusing on specific objectives that influence implementation of wildlife safe passage measures at multiple scales, from federal legislation to community-building.

American Wildlands will pursue the following objectives in our 2008-2009 *Safe Passages* program:

- * **Influence national and regional transportation policy, as related to the protection and mitigation of wildlife movement across U.S. Northern Rockies transportation routes**
- * **Conduct and facilitate regional planning for the protection of wildlife linkages where they intersect with transportation routes**
- * **Build and strengthen U.S. Northern Rockies' professional Safe Passages community**
- * Increase public education and support for Safe Passages issues (through on-the-ground mitigation projects at Bozeman Pass, Highway 2, Hwy 200, & the Ninemile Area)

As a continuation of the granting for the *Safe Passages* program provided by the Turner Foundation in 2007, this grant proposal requests \$[REDACTED] in funding to advance *Objectives #1-3*, for a 10 month period from October 2008 through July 2009. Different from last year's Turner Foundation grant proposal, we are not asking for funds for Objective 4: *Increasing Public Support Through Safe Passages Mitigation Projects*. Instead, per the Foundation's interests, we are focusing on the policy-related objectives. Following is an outline of the activities for each objective:

Objective 1: Influence National and Regional Transportation Policy

Influence national policy through language and funding in the 2009 Federal Transportation Enhancement Act (TEA). American Wildlands is a steering committee member of the Transwild Alliance. This alliance is actively engaging with legislators over the next seven months to influence the content of the next TEA bill.

Influence State and Regional Policy through implementation of the Western Governors Association's Wildlife Corridors Initiative. In FY08, American Wildlands has been a key participant in the development of the policy recommendations that were adopted by the Western Governors in June 2008. In FY09, American Wildlands will continue to influence the implementation of these recommendations by participating in a multi-state implementation steering committee.

Objective 2: Conduct and Facilitate Regional Planning in Crucial Areas

Finalize and Disseminate American Wildlands' Wildlife Linkage and Highway Hotspot Rapid Assessment. This process, which was initiated under the FY08 Turner grant, will be finalized and disseminated to our key state, federal, and conservation partners.

Influence and Improve the Montana Statewide Wildlife Linkage and Transportation Assessment.

Building upon the synergy we have created by engaging agency staff as partners in our in-house rapid assessment, in FY09 we will promote the adoption of our hotspot analysis protocol by key state agencies such that it will be implemented on a state wide scale.

Objective 3: Build U.S. Northern Rockies' Professional Safe Passages Community

Continue to build readership of our Safe Passages E-Bulletin. This online bulletin has been extremely successful, with a current 116 subscribers from around North America. The unique nature of this bulletin is that American Wildlands serves as a “clearinghouse” for safe passage best management practices, and has created an online professional community.

American Wildlands Overview

This year, American Wildlands is celebrating thirty years of conservation programs and accomplishments. While our strategic forte had changed a few times in those three decades, the primary focus of the organization has remained the same – to use science, respectful advocacy, community engagement and the most cutting edge conservation tools available at the time as the foundation of our on-the-ground efforts to ensure the protection of the vast wildlands, healthy wild waters, and abundant wildlife of the west. This work is highlighted in the organizational focus of each of AWL's three eras:

- 1) AWL's founding directors helping blaze the trail for the new wilderness movement, focusing on establishing wilderness areas (as well as wild and scenic rivers) throughout the west and Alaska;
- 2) our “forest watch” days when we watch-dogged logging and other resource extraction activities in the roadless areas of our public lands and provided one-of-a-kind training to more than 1,400 citizens on how to engage in local forest management planning and monitoring;
- 3) our present day focus on using the best science and computer technology to identify and conserve critical wildlife corridors, including the pioneering computer model and mapping work we conducted to identify critical wildlife corridors for the entire U.S. Northern Rockies region (which still stands as one of the most, if not the most, comprehensive projects of its type ever undertaken in the United States).

American Wildlands has always been proud of our commitment to using the latest and greatest conservation tools to advance, influence effective conservation campaigns. With thirty years of expertise and experience at our service, and knowing we are integrally connected to the most visionary conservation biologists and campaigns in the west, we look forward to using this successful strategy to address the major threats and opportunities for conserving biodiversity in the next thirty years.

American Wildlands: *Safe Passages* Program

With the arrival of the new science of Road Ecology, state and federal land and wildlife agencies and conservation NGOs are increasingly focused on addressing the intersection between transportation, wildlife and habitat management issues. This is good news, given the impact highways have on fragmenting our landscape and making wildlife corridors less safe for animals, while wrecking havoc on local and migrating wildlife populations as large numbers of individuals get killed trying to navigate these busy roadways. Here in the Northern Rockies, every year there are thousands of collisions between vehicles and wildlife on the region's highways, and these accidents are usually lethal for wildlife. These accidents also come with a high societal cost, as they can result in human death, injury and thousands of dollars in property damage. Recent research found that the societal costs (loss of wildlife, carcass removal, vehicle repair, medical, police, ambulance, etc.) of hitting a deer is \$8,000, hitting an elk is \$18,000, and hitting a moose is up to \$30,000.

The remedy to this threat to wildlife and society is conceptually simple – make highways safer for wildlife to cross. At its most basic level, this work entails providing safe passage structures (overpasses, underpasses, etc.) across highways for wildlife, as well as innovative animal detection systems and other information to help drivers know where and how to avoid collisions with wildlife. Given that most everyone has a story to tell about how hitting wildlife was an unpleasant and unfortunate experience (ecologically, economically and human safety wise), one could easily get the impression that implementing these “safe passage” measures would be politically easy to do.

Unfortunately, this is not necessarily the case, because there is a resistance within the administrative levels of state transportation departments to plan for, fund and institute safe passage techniques. This resistance exists because these departments have historically focused on providing “transportation corridors” – or roads – for people, and the new push for addressing wildlife corridors across our highways is counter to the long-standing culture of many state transportation agencies.

American Wildlands is the only conservation organization in the U.S. Northern Rockies with a program and two staff dedicated to addressing highway impacts on habitat connectivity and wildlife movements. We have been focused on this issue for four years, first as a project within our *Corridors of Life* program, and then in fall 2006 elevating the organization's commitment to this issue by establishing a *Safe Passages* program. Our experience and expertise is highlighted by the following accomplishments: playing a lead NGO role in having SAFETEA-LU adopt six new wildlife provisions publishing a citizens “Guide to Transportation Planning and Projects Affecting Wildlife in the U.S. Northern Rockies”; co-hosting a three-day Road Ecology for Conservationists workshop that brought participants from across the country; Engaging in, and in most cases initiating and facilitating, between four and six working groups to address specific on-the-ground highway projects during the last four years.

2009 Project Goals, Objectives, Outcomes and Timeline

Following are detailed descriptions regarding our activities to fulfill our project objectives.

Objective 1: Influence National and Regional Transportation Policy

a. Influence National Transportation Policy through language and funding in the 2009 Federal Transportation Enhancement Act (TEA). Much of the funding for wildlife crossing structures in the Northern Rockies comes from Federal Highway sources. According the Defenders of Wildlife, “Getting up to Speed” conservation guidebook and their recent Transportation Enhancement, Activity 11 user’s manual, there is up to \$61 million dollars available Transportation Enhancement section of the current SAFETEA-LU bill; only \$11.5 million of which has been taken advantage of for protecting/ensuring wildlife movement across highways. Even though SAFETEA-LU, and the funding associated with it, has been in place since 2005, the conservation community, as well as agency personnel are just becoming savvy in obtaining these funds for wildlife crossing structures.

American Wildlands recently collaborated in a wildlife crossing and mitigation effort on Montana Highway 206 that utilized such funding. Transportation Enhancement funds were used to pay for the bulk (80%) of the underpass crossing structure (http://wildlands.org/E_Bulletins/SP_June08.html). American Wildlands facilitated community fundraising for the remainder of the funds needed for this effort. It is important, therefore that we continue to lobby for these funds in the upcoming 2009 TEA bill. We are also members of the TransWild Alliance, initiated by Defenders of Wildlife. This alliance (<http://www.transwildalliance.org>), is taking further steps to becoming a sophisticated and organized voice for wildlife and transportation.

In order to best ensure continued language and funding for wildlife crossings in the 2009 TEA bill, American Wildlands will participate in the Transwild Alliance’s task force to lobby for language and maintained funding for wildlife in TEA bill. AWL will provide the group with scientific expertise on habitat connectivity. We will provide writing to the task force that will place transportation legislation and funding into context with wildlife connectivity needs. We will also provide background and details regarding our on-the-ground projects, to demonstrate the financial needs of states for wildlife mitigation, and demonstrate wildlife movement successes that can be achieved through TEA funding.

b. Influence State and Regional Policy through the leveraging of the Western Governor Association’s Initiative. In addition to lending scientific knowledge, experience, strategy, and voice in the national efforts to influence language for mandated consideration of wildlife and funding for crossing structures in the next national TEA bill, American Wildlands will also continue to work hard to influence policy and guidelines at the regional and state level. In 2008, American Wildlands was part of the writing team on the transportation committee that was tasked with developing policy recommendations for the Western Governors Policy Resolution 07-01, Wildlife Corridors and Crucial Habitat Initiatives. In June 2008, these policy recommendations were adopted by the Western Governors Association (WGA). Our participation in the Western Governor’s Association has earned us an increased level of respect from the agencies which will be influenced by the guidelines.

After the adoption of the Wildlife Corridors and Crucial Habitat Policy Recommendations, the Western Governors Association formed the Western Wildlife Habitat Council to implement these policies. While this council is made up of only agency representatives, American Wildlands and several other conservation groups are already organizing to integrate with this council. This conservation community implementation effort is being kicked off in September 2008. Conservation groups will develop campaign plans to implement the Policy recommendations for western states.

Specifically, in FY2009 AWL will participate as an active member in the WGA Wildlife Corridors Conservation Community Implementation team to best steer regional policy that includes state and regional support for planning and mitigating highways for better wildlife movement. American Wildlands expects that participation in this group will lead to the development of state campaigns in the U.S. Northern Rockies. These campaign plans will include strategies for implementation of WGA policy on a federal, state, and local level, and will include capacity assessment, messaging and media strategies, and identify local collaborative opportunities. American Wildlands anticipates that by July 2009, a well developed campaign plan for the U.S. Northern Rockies states will be developed.

Objective 2) Conduct and Facilitate Regional Planning in Crucial Areas

A. Finalize and Disseminate American Wildlands' Wildlife Linkage and Transportation Hotspot Rapid Assessment. In FY08, in part through our funding from the Turner Foundation, American Wildlands initiated two projects in Montana to influence and inform regional planning for wildlife crossing structures priorities. The first was an internal American Wildlands Linkage and Transportation Hotspot Rapid Analysis of wildlife linkage areas and road-kill hotspots. This analysis is designed to provide information needed to determine our own priorities for on-the-ground crossing structure projects, as well as to inform the efforts of other organizations and agencies.

We used our 2007 Priority Linkage Assessment (PLA), a key component of our *Corridors of Life* program, as a critical data layer in the internal rapid assessment analysis. Through the PLA process, we interviewed over 50 biologists in the region representing expert opinion of wildlife linkage agencies, from the agencies and organizations working in the region. With the relationships, trust and respect we built through the PLA interviews, we were able to quickly bring together the next higher level of decision makers and form an advisory committee for the rapid assessment. The advisory committee built for the assessment is comprised of 12 members, representing decision makers from MT Department of Transportation, US Federal Highways, US Forest Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, MT Fish Wildlife and Parks, the Western Transportation Institute, and the Wildlife Conservation Society.

Our Linkage and Transportation Hotspot Rapid Analysis has seven stages: [1] Data Collection; [2] Formation of Advisory Group; [3] Methodology Development; [4] Wildlife Hotspot Analysis; [5] Advisory Group Analysis of Methods and Results; [6] Prioritization; and [7] Information Serving and Training

By the end of October 2008, we will have completed all stages 1-6. The final and very critical seventh stage (*Information Serving and Training*) will be completed in FY 2009. AWL will rely on lessons learned from our Priority Linkage Assessment and the advisory group feedback for the setup of the information serving system.

Already, we have learned that there will be a variety of information formats needed by the other groups involved in this process; thus it is imperative to plan this part of the analysis project well. The completed rapid assessment will have succeeded in informing our internal strategic planning process, but to best leverage the information gathered, and to influence the number of appropriately designed and implemented crossing structures in the Northern Rockies, the advisory committee and additional groups will need to trust, access and utilize this information as well. American Wildlands has a long history of playing an information bearing role, and will use our institutional expertise to design the information serving process.

To best serve the information generated in the rapid analysis, we will engage in the following information serving and training activities:

- 1) Produce a Rapid Assessment Report (Production deadline: December 2008)
- 2) Post data and maps on the Montana statewide data clearinghouse - a common GIS resource used by all agencies in the state (Target date: February 2009)
- 3) Setup an on-line Map and Data Server for Interactive maps (ability to turn on/off data layers, zoom in and out, print out maps from on-line, data download, on-line report, “canned” map series) (Target date: April 2009)
- 4) Provide training and workshops (First training session by: June 2009)

B. Influence and Improve the Montana Statewide Wildlife Linkage and Transportation Assessment In FY 2008, American Wildlands strategically focused on being a catalyst for the initiation of a statewide Montana wildlife linkage and highway hotspot analysis. During the year, through our Priority Linkage Assessment efforts and our Linkage and Transportation Rapid Assessment, we worked to forge relationships with the agencies responsible for wildlife linkage and transportation issues in the state - namely Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) and the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT). American Wildlands chose to focus on Montana rather than the other states in our region (Idaho and Wyoming) because Montana is lagging behind both Idaho and Wyoming on the issue of statewide planning for linkage and wildlife mitigation across highway systems. Also, unlike Idaho and Wyoming, the two state sister agencies in Montana have historically not had a successful working relationship, which ultimately makes it difficult to develop solutions to wildlife-road issues. AWL wants to help change/improve that relationship.

Meanwhile, as of June 2008, Idaho completed its assessment of wildlife linkage/highway intersections. They still have yet to prioritize the intersections (which is a formidable task). However, their Fish and Game Department is working with the Idaho Transportation, along with other agencies, to drive their six year statewide assessment process. And while Wyoming does not yet have a statewide assessment of wildlife linkage and highway intersection hotspots, the state’s Department of Transportation and Division of Fish and Game work well together, and currently there are no issues emerging in dealing with wildlife-road issues.

As of July 2008, based in part to our advocating for connectivity analysis after the statewide action plans were completed, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) is leading a statewide crucial habitat and linkage effort. Within this effort, they have a transportation risk assessment planned. However, they view the MT Department of Transportation (MDT) as an obstacle. American Wildlands has recently been able to gain traction in acting as a bridge between the two state agencies. Through our rapid assessment analysis, we have developed strong relationships with both agencies. We plan to use the advisory group and advisory meetings as a means to bring the two organizations closer together in the statewide effort. We will be successful if in the end MDT is seen by MFWP not just as a source for needed data (roadkill locations and crossing structure locations), but as a collaborative partner.

In FY2009, to help facilitate a collaborative and successful statewide assessment in Montana, American Wildlands will:

- * Facilitate a two-agency “sit down” with higher level decision makers in MFWP and MDT (Fall 2009).
- * Continue to leverage the influence and interest of other agencies for a statewide assessment. Agency personnel from US Federal Highways, USFWS, and USFS have indicated that a collaborative statewide assessment is needed. At the last meeting, US Federal Highways offered to help to find funding for the effort.
- * Work to design and implement a shared funding strategy adopted by the agencies, whereby each entity provides some money for the statewide assessment. This will help ensure interdependency and better cooperation between agencies and related organizations.

If we are successful at steering the statewide assessment into a partnership based process, we believe the following outcomes will be achieved:

- A collaborative, multi-agency process with buy-in from all agencies
- Faster adoption of the statewide assessment results
- Agreement of priorities for the entire state will be agreed upon and understood by all agencies
- Increased inter-agency cooperation, particularly between MFWP and MDT
- Efficiency of crossing structure identification
- In the long term, the number of wildlife crossing structures in Montana will increase
- Collaborative sources of funding for construction will increase
- Structural and cultural changes will occur within MDT, such that the way they collect data (such as roadkill and crossing structure locations) will change and improve
- Information/data sharing between the agencies and organizations will improve

Objective 3) Build U.S. Northern Rockies' Professional Safe Passages Community

A. Continue to build readership of our Safe Passages E-Bulletin and improve information quality and presentation In 2006, American Wildlands devised a strategy to better engage our region's safe passage practitioners. First, we collaborated with Western Transportation Institute, Yellowstone to Yukon, and the Wildlife Conservation Society to hold a Road Ecology Workshop in Bozeman, Montana. This workshop was attended by over 100 conservation activists and agency personnel from within the U.S. and Canadian Rockies, and other parts of the nation. This workshop, in addition to being a useful information sharing venture, also identified American Wildlands as a regional leader in Safe Passages issues and expertise.

Following that successful gathering, in 2007 we produced and distributed our first Safe Passage electronic bulletin. The bulletin is designed to present the best management practices (including summaries and links to new research, tools of the trade, news and policy). Because the time spans between conferences and workshops where these topics were being discussed is long (every 2 years), the e-bulletin was designed to keep the information of safe passages live and dynamic by including [1] technical, yet easy-to-read summaries of best practices, and [2] links to materials and detailed information. The e-bulletin also provides an avenue for others who aren't immersed in the issues of Safe Passages, but who we need to "win over" to increase the effectiveness of the Safe Passages initiatives. These people may never attend a Safe Passages national conference or regional Road Ecology workshop, but they may read/scan a convenient electronic bulletin which discusses the issues.

As of July 2008, we have produced three e-bulletin issues. The July issue was the launching of our more streamlined email newsletter format that is more "scannable", with slightly fewer articles, but the same number of links to people and resources, as the previous versions. This new format will allow us to produce more timely issues (one every other month), while maintaining the high quality of information. As of July 31st, we have 116 registered subscribers (up from 65 a year ago and up from 95 since June 1st). We distribute the newsletter to an additional 150 non-registered readers.

In FY2009, we will be working to improve e-bulletin readership and effectiveness by:

- Produce an e-bulletin every other month in the new format
- Increase the official e-bulletin subscribers from 116 to 150
- Evaluate newsletter effectiveness and quality through on-line surveys (available to readers in through a link in each newsletter)
- Continue advertising of the subscription option through our non-subscriber email list and advertising the newsletter at upcoming meetings workshops, where program staff will be presenting. The first of these will be the Wild Links Conference in Spokane, Washington in September.

PRIMARY AMERICAN WILDLANDS STAFF IMPLEMENTING THIS WORK PLAN

Elizabeth Williamson, Safe Passages Coordinator: Elizabeth has been involved with our conservation strategies both from a technical (GIS) and programmatic (Corridors of Life program) level. She brings a high level of institutional knowledge and strategic know-how to the Safe Passages program. She is experienced in outreach and cooperative land management initiatives, with state and federal agencies. She earned a B.A. in Geography, University of Vermont (1993), and an M.S. in Land Resources and Environmental Sciences, Montana State University (2001). Elizabeth joined the staff in June, 2001.

April Johnston, Conservation Director: April brings ten years of state agency technical and policy experience with restoration/conservation science to American Wildlands. After spending the last 16 years working in and around the Florida Everglades, 10 of which she was a state biologist, April relocated to Bozeman to fulfill a long-time goal of living in the Northern Rockies. April obtained a B.S. in biology and marine biology from Palm Beach Atlantic University in 1995, and a M.S. in Biological Sciences from Florida Atlantic University in 2001. April joined the staff in November, 2006.

Sarah Olimb, GIS Lab Manager: Sarah earned a master's degree using GIS to quantify the impact of surrounding landscape on beetle populations in residual prairie patches of western Minnesota. Sarah earned a B.S. in Population and Conservation Ecology from the University of Georgia and a M.S. in Biology from the University of North Dakota. After five months as AWL's GIS apprentice, Sarah joined the staff in October, 2006.

Partner Organizations:

Montana Department of Transportation (MDT)
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (MFWP)
US Fish and Wildlife Service
US Forest Service
Western Governors Association
Western Environmental LawCenter
Defenders of Wildlife (Transwild Alliance)
Western Transportation Institute
State and federal senators and representatives (including Mike Phillips)
Montana Governor's Office
County commissioners and planners