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September 7, 2018

Roger Millar
Secretary of Transportation
Washington State Department of Transportation
P. O. Box 47300
Olympia, WA 98504-7300

Topic: Highway 97 Wildlife Underpass Support

Dear Secretary Millar,

In north central Washington State, two important movement corridors intersect on Highway 97 in the Okanogan Valley: a vital north-south transportation and freight corridor and an east-west habitat connection for wildlife, specifically thousands of mule deer journeying between public and private open lands to access quality browse and habitat on either side of the valley. This stretch of highway has among the state's highest rate of auto/deer collisions, presenting a huge safety hazard. In fact, more than 350 deer are needlessly killed along just a 12-mile stretch of this highway every year while also placing human lives and property at risk.

Community partners including the Mule Deer Foundation led by the local Okanogan Trails chapter have launched capital campaigns to raise funds for the purchase of the first underpass structure, while working with a diverse suite of partners to ask the Washington State Legislature to leverage this private support to fully fund Phase 1 in the 2019-2021 transportation bill. Okanogan Land Trust is in favor of the full funding of Phase 1 and supports the capital campaign initiative being carried out by the Mule Deer Foundations and others.

In addition to providing safer passage on this stretch of Highway 97, these improvements are part of a strategic business plan to add up to landscape scale improvements for people and wildlife. From 2014 through 2020 an impressive coalition of state, federal, tribal and nongovernmental interests have joined together in the Working for Wildlife Initiative, enabled and facilitated by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, for the purpose of protecting and connecting wildlife habitat, rural livelihoods and heritage in a key location, the diverse landscape of the central Okanogan Valley. Okanogan Land Trust has fully engaged and carried out project work on behalf of the Working for Wildlife Initiative. We have gone so far as to secure a conservation easement, with a private landowner, specifically designed to assist and facilitate a location for a wildlife underpass and serve as a keystone property in the east-west wildlife connectivity corridor. I would be glad to speak with you, or your designee, in detail about the merits and benefits of the placement of this conservation easement that abuts the highway corridor and links public lands.

The success of this initiative in its final years is dependent upon the completion of Phase 1 of safer passage plans on Highway 97, and the legacy of continued improvements as necessary on the full highway corridor. Okanogan Land Trust supports this project as it addresses the safety of highway users and protects the wildlife species that utilize this area to meet their habitat needs.

Thank you and best regards,

Jerry DeBacker
Executive Director