



## **Summit County Safe Passages**

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**TO: Summit County Board of County Commissioners (Board)**

**FROM: Julia Kintsch & Ashley Nettles, Summit County Safe Passages**

**SUBJECT: Summit County Safe Passages Plan (Plan) Review and Discussion**

**Date: Prepared for June 18, 2019 Board Work Session**

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### **PURPOSE:**

The purpose of the June 18 work session is to review the Summit County Safe Passages (SCSP) Plan and discuss requested next steps for Summit County to adopt or endorse the plan, and support implementation of key plan strategies, working in collaboration with other SCSP stakeholders, to advance wildlife connectivity and motorist safety goals in Summit County. At the work session, county staff and representatives from SCSP will provide the Board with an overview of the SCSP Plan and implementation priorities, including the requested role of county staff in helping to advance the goals of the Plan. The June 18 discussion will focus on Summit County's requested participation in collaborative implementation of the SCSP Plan through specific actions that will preserve and restore wildlife connectivity and improve safety on roads in Summit County for wildlife and drivers alike.

A draft resolution has been prepared and is attached for the Board's consideration. If adopted by the Board, this resolution would formally adopt or endorse the SCSP Plan and acknowledge Summit County's intent to continue ongoing collaborative work with SCSP to support plan implementation. The requested role of Summit County Government in helping to implement the SCSP Plan over the coming years includes:

- Integrating wildlife considerations into County code amendments and future master plan updates.
- Developing a County / CDOT Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA) to facilitate the transmission of future funds to design and construction of wildlife mitigation projects.
- Supporting SCSP community education and outreach efforts by adding a link on the County website and participating in future events as a SCSP member organization.

Based on direction received from the Board and County managers' office, this resolution could be revised as determined appropriate, for review and adoption at an upcoming BOCC meeting.

**BACKGROUND:**

Wildlife need to move about freely in order to access food and water, reproduce, and migrate. In many cases, wildlife must cross roads and highways to access the resources they need. When this occurs, both wildlife and motorists are at risk of wildlife-vehicle collisions. In Colorado, wildlife-vehicle collisions cost an estimated \$66.4 million to our economy each year. The impacts to wildlife are also high, resulting in wildlife mortality and negative effects on population health which, in turn, results in decreased opportunities for wildlife viewing and hunting. The most effective way to create safer roads for wildlife and people is by building wildlife crossing structures that allow wildlife to cross over or under roads, out of the line of traffic. Reconnecting the landscape with such structures keeps wildlife populations healthy, with associated ecological, social and economic benefits to Summit County, and makes our roads much safer for motorists as well. In the long run, these structures have been shown to pay for themselves in terms of collisions avoided.

Summit County's Comprehensive Plan also recognizes the value of wildlife movement, highlighting the need to identify wildlife corridors and to improve our understanding of wildlife populations and habitat. SCSP is aligned with this objective and, through our planning process, has compiled the best available data and information, providing the County with an up to date assessment of wildlife movement priorities in Summit County. SCSP was created to engage diverse stakeholders across the county to create collaborative solutions for safe wildlife passage across Summit County. These stakeholders represent a variety of entities and interests, including the U.S. Forest Service, CDOT, CPW, Summit County, towns, ski areas, non-profit conservation organizations and other interested community members. As wildlife are unaware of jurisdictional and administrative boundaries, establishing these diverse partnerships is vital to protecting wildlife movements across the landscape. The intended results are improved landscape connectivity for wildlife, reduced wildlife-vehicle collisions, safer driving conditions, and increased public awareness and engagement.

Through the efforts of SCSP, Summit County is becoming recognized as a leader for effective, stakeholder-driven landscape connectivity initiatives across the state and nation. In particular, the Colorado Wildlife and Transportation Alliance regularly highlights the work of SCSP as a model for creating diverse, local partnerships to advance common interests to reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions (WVCs) while maintaining healthy wildlife populations. The Alliance was formed in 2018 and is a statewide coalition consisting of the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT), Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) and other state, federal, tribal and nonprofit partners that is working together to institutionalize wildlife considerations into transportation projects and to build new partnerships to help fund and implement wildlife-highway mitigation projects. With the completion of the SCSP Plan and an established network of local stakeholders committed to its implementation, Summit County is well positioned to leverage this statewide partnership to advance local priorities.

**SCSP Planning Process and Stakeholder Engagement:**

In 2017, a year-long stakeholder driven planning process was completed, resulting in the Summit County Safe Passages Plan. Summit County representatives from the Planning and Open Space

and Trails departments have been engaged in this process since the outset, working with other stakeholders to create a common vision for preserving wildlife movements across Summit County. Specifically, the Plan:

- Identifies important wildlife movement areas and highway crossing zones based on existing data and expertise;
- Recommends the best locations for crossing structures for different types of wildlife to integrate wildlife-highway mitigation into transportation projects;
- Provides land use and land management guidance for the purpose of informing planning, permitting, recreation/trails development, public lands management, and private land conservation in important wildlife movement areas.

The Plan identifies 17 wildlife linkage areas along state highways in the county. These linkage areas were prioritized based on wildlife and biological values, safety hazard, threats to connectivity and the opportunity to implement mitigation and conservation measures in these areas. The Plan provides specific recommendations for protecting wildlife movement corridors and reducing wildlife-vehicle conflicts in three priority landscapes - the Lower Blue River valley, the Upper Blue River valley, and Vail Pass. SCSP's work includes encouraging and supporting agency and community stakeholders to integrate wildlife movement needs into transportation projects, land management and land use; collaborating with engineers to design cost-effective wildlife crossing structures and other mitigation strategies; and conducting outreach with local organizations, schools, residents and visitors to Summit County.

To advance the vision of Summit County Safe Passages, a Communication and Coordination Committee and individual linkage implementation teams have been formed with representation from a diverse group of partner organizations. These groups meet on a regular basis to oversee and facilitate implementation of the Summit County Safe Passages Plan. All of our partners are essential to ensuring connectivity for wildlife across roads and across jurisdictional boundaries and to achieving the SCSP vision.

#### **Priority Landscapes:**

- *Vail Pass Wildlife Byway* – This linkage area extends between Copper Mountain Resort and the top of Vail Pass, and is almost entirely on National Forest Lands. This linkage provides important habitat for a variety of wildlife including elk, mule deer, moose and one of the few known breeding populations of Canada lynx outside of southwest Colorado. This linkage team is focusing its efforts on fundraising for the Vail Pass Wildlife Byway, including up to three wildlife crossing structures. To date, \$190,000 has been raised from Vail Resorts and Arapahoe Basin to conduct an engineering feasibility study and refine mitigation concepts that is planned to begin this summer.

Multiple partners are active in this landscape and contributing to the SCSP connectivity objectives here. In 2015 Rocky Mountain Wild and Denver Zoo initiated a citizen science program to monitor wildlife activity in the area surrounding the proposed overpass using motion-triggered cameras. Vail Resorts and Arapahoe Basin Ski Area have each contributed funding to conduct initial engineering assessments for wildlife mitigation on

this segment of I-70. Friends of the Dillon Ranger District provides guidance and support for grant opportunities and community outreach events. Copper Mountain Resort has pledged to partner in fundraising and outreach efforts for the proposed structures. Friends of the Eagles Nest Wilderness has adopted the Vail Pass Wildlife Byway as one of their advocacy campaigns. Muley Fanatic Foundation and Denver Zoo have provided funding for the website, which promotes this and other safe passages in Summit County. CPW, USFS, USFWS and CDOT have provided the time of several key staff members from each agency over the course of the project development and will continue to provide technical and expert support to advance roadway safety and wildlife connectivity.

- *Lower Blue River Linkage* – Located along State Highway 9 between Silverthorne and Green Mountain Reservoir, this linkage provides important year-round habitat for mule deer, elk, and moose as well as carnivores such as black bears and mountain lions. This area also has been identified as a regional priority through the West Slope Wildlife Prioritization Study, a joint research effort by the Colorado Department of Transportation and Colorado Parks and Wildlife.

This linkage area is also important to local residents and landowners of the Lower Blue valley, many of who sit as contributing members on the linkage team. Included on that team are our partners from USFS, CPW, and CDOT who donate their time to working with the residents of the valley to find solutions to the complex wildlife-vehicle issues along this section of Highway 9. SCSP also has the support of the Lower Blue Planning Commission and Friends of the Lower Blue River, who have a page on their website featuring our projects. Blue Valley Ranch has generously provided funding that will allow SCSP to purchase education and outreach materials for community events. Site visits to refine mitigation concepts are planned for this summer with partners.

- *Upper Blue River Linkage* – Located along State Highway 9 between Breckenridge and the Town of Blue River, this linkage provides important habitat for moose and allows wildlife such as mule deer, elk and dispersing Canada lynx to move through the valley. Wildlife movement through this linkage is at risk due to increasing residential development and high traffic volumes.

Partners in this linkage area include the Town of Breckenridge, USFS, CDOT, CPW, the Continental Divide Land Trust and Breckenridge Ski Resort. Local citizens have been involved with Town of Blue River and Summit County planning processes to ensure that recommendations set forth in the SCSP Plan are incorporated into capital improvements projects and that wildlife connectivity and the Plan are considered in future developments. SCSP has been actively involved the Access Control Plan for the section of Highway 9 that runs through the Town of Blue River where several crossing structures have been recommended, in part, to address recent increases in highly dangerous moose-vehicle collisions.

### **Key Strategies for 2019/2020:**

- *Develop and Implement Mitigation Concepts for Priority Landscapes* – SCSP will coordinate with CDOT to advance wildlife-highway mitigation in the three priority landscapes identified in the Plan. This will involve refining the preliminary recommendations provided in the Plan to produce detailed mitigation concepts that may be incorporated into transportation projects (e.g., shoulder widening) or advanced as stand-alone mitigation projects (e.g., Vail Pass Wildlife Byway). This strategy will also involve substantial fundraising through grants, private donors or other sources to leverage transportation funding to complete the mitigation design and construction. This strategy will result in the completion of conceptual mitigation designs in at least two of the priority linkages over the next two years.
  
- *Community Education and Outreach* – SCSP will organize and execute a minimum of 5-10 fundraising and outreach events each year to educate residents and visitors alike on the need for safe passages to provide connectivity for wildlife and improve highway safety for motorists. The success of our education and outreach efforts will be measured by the number of outreach events held and the number of community members and visitors reached, as well as the number of people that further their engagement in SCSP.
  
- *Integrate Wildlife Considerations into Land Management and Land Use Planning* – Wildlife cross multiple barriers and jurisdictional boundaries in their daily and seasonal movements. SCSP will coordinate with public land managers, wildlife managers and local governments to ensure coordinated land management across jurisdictional boundaries in important wildlife movement areas. Specifically, the SCSP Plan states the following regarding Summit County master plans and code regulations:
  - Support Summit County with integrating information and recommendations from the Safe Passages for Wildlife Plan into the upcoming county master plan and basin plan updates.
  - Coordinate with Summit County on land use policy and regulations that support the goals of the Safe Passages Plan.

Accordingly, SCSP proposes to work with Summit County planners to integrate wildlife habitat and movement considerations into future comprehensive plan and basin master plan updates and code amendments. In addition, SCSP will engage with the Intermountain Transportation Planning Region and the Colorado Wildlife and Transportation Alliance to ensure that the local initiatives identified in the Plan are integrated into these larger planning efforts. The success of this strategy will be measured by the number of wildlife-friendly code amendments adopted by local governments in Summit County and the number of SCSP priorities reflected in the Intermountain Transportation Plan.

### **Incorporating Wildlife Movement Considerations into County Master Planning and Code**

Summit County encompasses large tracts of land managed by the U.S. Forest Service that are important for wildlife habitat and movement, and the Forest Service has been a major partner both in initiating SCSP and in implementing the Plan and ensuring that land management actions in the Forest are compatible with and enhance wildlife activity. Yet privately held lands in the County are also essential to wildlife movements and population health. These unincorporated portions of the county include many of the priority movement areas identified by SCSP, particularly where residential development and recreation access coincide with lowland habitat and winter range. Consequently, Summit County government has an important role in helping wildlife to be able to navigate these landscapes and ensuring compatible land uses in key wildlife movement areas. Notably, multiple opportunities exist for integrating wildlife considerations into county planning and development. Specifically, during revisions to the Comprehensive Plan and the accompanying Basin Master Plans, as well as during updates to the County Land Use and Development Code that are established to protect public health, safety and community values, including our shared environment and wildlife resources.

While updates to the Comprehensive Plan and Basin Master Plans are currently on hold, we request that planning staff work with the SCSP team to develop policies that can be incorporated into future master plan updates to better address wildlife movement needs during the planning process. The current Comprehensive Plan is very general regarding the protection of environmental resources. More explicit policies could specify the need to protect and restore wildlife habitat and connectivity for the benefit of both people and wildlife. In addition, during future updates to the individual Basin Master Plans, SCSP recommends incorporating more detailed references to wildlife movement and the priority areas identified in the SCSP Plan. Specifically, these updates may evaluate changes to land use designations in wildlife linkages and policies that are unique to a particular landscape. The Basin Plan updates will also benefit from the data compiled for the SCSP as well as the output maps.

There is also an opportunity to work with County staff to develop specific regulations designed to support the goals of the Safe Passages program and wildlife health. This would require amendments to the County Land Use Code; these code amendments could include looking at potential revisions to the existing wildlife habitat overlay district, bear resistant trash containers, and wildlife friendly fencing.

#### **REQUESTED NEXT STEPS FOR THE BOCC:**

The SCSP team requests that the BOCC authorize Summit County Government to pursue the following next steps.

- *Plan Adoption or Endorsement* – Formally adopt or endorse the SCSP at an upcoming BOCC meeting. By adopting or endorsing the SCSP Plan, Summit County would demonstrate its commitment to safer roads for both wildlife and people and provide direction to County staff and collaborators to incorporate these connectivity and safety values with other community values. For example, in neighboring Eagle County,

commissioners have adopted the Eagle County Safe Passages Plan as one of several 'special master plans that exist outside of the Comprehensive Plan that deal with specific topics or operations of importance.'

- *Integrate Wildlife Considerations into Upcoming County Code Amendments and Future Updates to the Countywide Comprehensive Plan and Basin Master Plans.*
- *Collaborate with SCSP for ongoing Plan Implementation* – Support the continued engagement of County Staff in SCSP's collaborative efforts and initiatives by continuing to participate in the SCSP Collaboration and Communication Committee as well as in linkage team meetings.
- *Develop a Summit County / CDOT Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA) to Facilitate the Transmission of Funds Received for the Design and Construction of Wildlife Mitigation Projects in Summit County* – SCSP is actively engaging in fundraising to design and construct wildlife-highway mitigation projects in Summit County. These funds must ultimately be channeled to CDOT, the agency responsible for implementing transportation projects on state highways. An IGA between Summit County and CDOT would allow for the efficient transfer of funds raised by SCSP to CDOT via the County. SCSP is a registered non-profit entity with the Secretary of State and fiscally sponsored by Rocky Mountain Wild, a registered 501(c)3.
- *Add a Link on Summit County's Website to the [SCSP Website](#)* – Demonstrate Summit County's collaboration with SCSP and help educate Summit County residents and visitors about safe passages for wildlife.

A draft resolution to accomplish these next steps is attached for the Board's reference, which can be customized to be appropriate for Summit County based on direction received from the Board and County Manager's office. If directed by the Board, staff can move forward with preparation of this resolution for review and adoption at an upcoming BOCC meeting.

**ATTACHMENTS:**

- Summit County Safe Passages Plan Executive Summary (a link to the full plan is available [here](#))
- June 11 work session presentation
- Draft resolution

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