



MOUNTAINS RECREATION & CONSERVATION AUTHORITY

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Project Study Report for Liberty Canyon Wildlife Crossing Released

Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy Funded Caltrans Report to Start the Process of Constructing a Regionally Significant Habitat Linkage across the US-101 Freeway in Agoura Hills

LOS ANGELES (September 3, 2015)—The Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) has announced the release of a ground breaking proposal prepared by the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) to evaluate the feasibility and cost of a proposed dedicated wildlife passage across US-101 near Liberty Canyon Road in the City of Agoura Hills. The Project Study Report (PSR), funded by the MRCA with a grant from the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (SMMC), is the first step in the long awaited vision to construct a safe and effective wildlife passage across the eight-lane freeway. The structure will connect the Santa Monica Mountains and the Simi Hills, and thereby help to protect the genetic integrity of wildlife populations in both areas.

US-101 is a formidable barrier for many wildlife species including mountain lions, bobcats, gray foxes, and mule deer that have historically traveled between these mountain ranges. In particular, populations of mammals with large home ranges such as mountain lions and bobcats need expansive areas in which to hunt, breed, and survive. The construction of the freeway divided this previously continuous habitat range into isolated fragments. For mountain lions in particular, the consequences of this restriction has resulted in significant inbreeding, territorial fighting, and low genetic diversity within the Santa Monica Mountains. National Park Service (NPS) researchers have documented serious threats to the long-term viability of the mountain lions if a structure is not constructed. Twelve mountain lions have been struck and killed by vehicles in the NPS study area since research began in 2002—including a male mountain lion hit on US-101 near Liberty Canyon Road in 2013.

Scientists have long identified Liberty Canyon as the optimum location to construct a wildlife crossing because of the large swaths of protected public land extending into the mountain ranges on either side of the freeway. The Caltrans PSR proposes that a wildlife crossing is feasible at this location and will help to link fragmented habitats on either side of the freeway.

“The public recognizes the significance of these mountains and has invested hundreds of millions of dollars to preserve them,” said Joseph T. Edmiston, Executive Director of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy. “Science militates that we construct the highest functioning wildlife crossing to ensure the survival of our native species—including mountain lions—in the local mountains.”

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“Caltrans is committed to working with our partners toward developing a sustainable wildlife crossing in this region. The completion of the PSR is the first step in this effort that will integrate critical environmental considerations into our transportation system,” said Caltrans District 7 Director Carrie Bowen.

The PSR proposes a crossing that would consist of a 165-foot wide by 200-foot long bridge spanning across the freeway with columns on spread footings in the freeway median and retaining walls on either end. The bridge would be landscaped with native, drought-tolerant vegetation to provide a passage that resembles the natural habitat. Noise barriers would reduce traffic noise and block vehicle light at night in order to make the crossing more effective for wildlife. The estimated cost of this most critical phase is \$30 million.

The proposal in the PSR to extend the bridge over Agoura Road will be considered. The ultimate details and environmental impacts of this continuation will be considered by the City of Agoura Hills through a combination of public hearings and/or community outreach workshops.

Recognizing the regional importance of the wildlife crossing, last year, California State Senator Fran Pavley convened a working group to focus government and scientific resources on developing a state of the art structure to provide safe passage across the freeway. In addition to the MRCA and the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, partners include Caltrans, California State Senator Fran Pavley, California State Assemblymember Richard Bloom, U.S. Congressman Ted Lieu, Los Angeles County Supervisor Sheila Kuehl, Ventura County Supervisor Linda Parks, Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, the National Wildlife Federation, The Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains (Project Architect), and the City of Agoura Hills.

“It’s critically important to provide a safe crossing over the busy 101 freeway for wildlife,” said California State Senator Fran Pavley (D-Agoura Hills), who lives near the proposed wildlife corridor. “A secure pathway also is essential to protect motorists, who could be killed or injured by collisions with animals.”

“Now, we need local, regional and national financial backing so we can construct the largest wildlife overpass in the United States,” Pavley said. “As Chair of the Senate Natural Resource and Water Committee, I’m extremely pleased with the work done so far by a dedicated, collaborative working group as well as the ongoing support from surrounding cities, community organizations, school children, nonprofit organizations and wildlife advocates.”

The release of the PSR is the foundational first step towards a final design for a regionally significant wildlife passage. Caltrans is about to begin the next stage in the

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(process, which is the preparation of the environmental document. The State Coastal Conservancy has granted \$1 million toward this effort. Public participation and input will be solicited during this period, which is expected to run through 2017. Other funding is being sought for the remaining \$3 million for the final design plans.

“For over a decade, we have been working towards the goal of creating this wildlife passage in the Santa Monica Mountains,” said California State Assemblymember Richard Bloom. “Now, through a PSR that presents a viable, scientifically valid wildlife overcrossing, that goal is within sight. Public support has never been stronger; the ecological need has never been greater.”

“This is a very promising first step toward creation of a safe wildlife crossing over the US-101 freeway,” said U.S. Congressman Ted Lieu. “The loss of several mountain lions trying to cross the US-101 demonstrates the vital role a wildlife crossing would play in preserving genetic diversity for many of the animals living in the Santa Monica Mountains and in protecting the fragile mountain ecosystem.”

The National Wildlife Federation and the Santa Monica Mountains Fund have established a fundraising initiative at www.savelacougars.org to raise funds for the engineering design and construction expenses.

About The Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority

The Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) is a local government public entity dedicated to the preservation and management of open space and parkland, watershed lands, trails, and wildlife habitat. The MRCA works in cooperation with other government partners to acquire parkland, participate in vital planning processes, provide natural resources and scientific expertise, and complete major park improvement projects.

The MRCA manages and provides ranger services and fire protection for almost 72,000 acres of parkland that it owns and that are owned by the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy or other agencies and provides comprehensive education and interpretation and leadership programs for youth. It is one of the lead agencies providing for the revitalization of the Los Angeles River.

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