

February 26, 2024

Honorable Chair Korman and Members of the House Environment and Transportation Committee
Room 251 House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: National Caucus of Environmental Legislators informational testimony for HB1129

Dear Honorable Chair Korman and Members of the House Environment and Transportation Committee:

My name is Logan Christian and I am the Wildlife and Habitat Coordinator with the National Caucus of Environmental Legislators (NCEL). Created by and for state legislators, NCEL serves as a resource for a network of over 1200 state lawmakers working to protect, conserve, and improve the natural and human environment.

Maryland is one of 14 states that are working on legislation related to wildlife corridors and crossings this year. Wildlife crossing structures - including wildlife overpasses, underpasses, and funnel fencing - have well-documented benefits. Transportation officials report over [90% reductions](#) in wildlife-vehicle collisions for appropriately sited wildlife crossings, while wildlife managers report improved access to and movement between habitat areas for wildlife populations, improving survival and genetic exchange. The effectiveness of wildlife crossings, coupled with the billions of dollars in federal funding recently made available for wildlife crossing infrastructure via the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), helped spur 15 states to enact over 30 wildlife corridors and crossing bills in the last two years.

States have taken a variety of legislative approaches related to wildlife corridors and crossings. These include measures to:

- 1) Study wildlife corridor locations and priority highway crossing sites
- 2) Improve coordination between state agencies to better address habitat connectivity
- 3) Provide funding for wildlife crossing projects
- 4) Improve state statutes and authorities to build habitat connectivity into project permitting and design processes
- 5) Protect habitat linkages between core wildlife habitat areas

Many of these bills helped states improve their chances of receiving federal funding from the first round of the Wildlife Crossings Pilot Program (WCPP), one of several IJA programs, which awarded \$110 million to 17 states in December 2023.

Maryland HB 1129 combines many of the above-mentioned legislative approaches while also tailoring the proposal to the state's particular needs. First, it calls for analysis of how wildlife crossings can be used to improve habitat connectivity for Maryland's threatened and endangered species, while also requiring a statewide deer population survey to better inform the construction of wildlife crossings that reduce deer-vehicle collisions. The bill would also update Maryland's highway design standards so that future transportation infrastructure additions account for wildlife passage, such as by using sufficient bank width under bridges to accommodate wildlife movement.

The bill also creates a long-term funding source for new wildlife crossing projects by creating a dedicated Wildlife Highway Crossing Fund. Three other states - including Colorado, New Mexico, and Nevada - have established a dedicated, interest-bearing fund for wildlife crossing projects. HB 1129 establishes such a fund, and also creates a dedicated funding source via a car insurance surcharge. The fund will help Maryland implement wildlife crossing projects that result from the statewide studies required by this bill, while also creating a source of matching funds for federal grants like the Wildlife Crossing Pilot Program, which will be available for at least another three years.

Lastly, the bill would improve coordination between the Department of Transportation and Department of Natural Resources to address habitat connectivity. Several states including Oregon, California, and Virginia require coordination between transportation and natural resource agencies, but Maryland's bill would clarify this coordination by creating dedicated liaison positions. HB 1129 aligns with some of the nation's most successful state habitat connectivity laws, while also setting Maryland apart from other states with the addition of a dedicated insurance surcharge and liaison positions.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Logan Christian

Logan Christian
Wildlife and Habitat Coordinator
National Caucus of Environmental Legislators