

Tuesday, April 2, 2024

TO: Marc Korman, Chair of the House Environment and Transportation Committee, and Committee Members

FROM: Michelle Dietz, The Nature Conservancy, Director of Government Relations; Cait Kerr, The Nature Conservancy, State Policy Manager

POSITION: Support SB 902 Wildlife - Protections and Highway Crossings

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports SB 902 offered by Senator Lewis Young. SB 902 will encourage the State Highway Administration and the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to collaboratively identify opportunity areas for incorporating wildlife passage features into transportation projects. This will reduce road impacts on imperiled species and reduce wildlife vehicle collision risks for motorists. The bill seeks to create a Wildlife Highway Crossings Fund to support wildlife crossing projects and the research needed to determine the most strategic locations for crossings. Agencies can use these grant funds to support administrative costs for activities outlined in this bill. It also requires the State Highway Administration to coordinate with DNR and apply for relevant federal funding opportunities for highway crossing projects. By addressing the high number of animal-vehicle collisions, SB 902 moves Maryland toward a safer future for both people and wildlife

Many species in Maryland can benefit from less expensive wildlife crossing underpasses, often built using existing structures like culverts and bridges. Virginia has already seen the benefits of underpasses – by monitoring wildlife-vehicle collisions before and after erecting directional fencing to funnel deer to culverts along I-64, deer-vehicle collisions in the area fell by an average of 92% after the fencing was installed. In just 1.8 years, the benefits of these culverts with exclusionary fencing exceeded the costs of fencing, with an average savings of \$2.3 million per site.

The section of the Appalachians running through West Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania is a critical corridor for species migrating in response to climate change. This section, known as the Allegheny Front, is a priority landscape to preserve the rich biodiversity of the larger Appalachian range as climate change drives species to move and adapt. Serving as a habitat bridge between vast conservation lands in the southern and northern Appalachians, the Allegheny Front plays a critical role in keeping this continental ecosystem connected. By providing safe passage across roadways, we can better protect migratory species traveling through this important corridor.

The precipitous decline in biodiversity is a global challenge, it is jeopardizing food and water supplies and undermining global, social and economic stability – we must all do our part to find solutions that safeguard biodiversity. TNC commends Senator Lewis Young on introducing this bill, which aims to protect Maryland's rich biodiversity, while also reducing wildlife collisions' safety and economic impacts on our roadways.

Therefore, we urge a favorable report on SB 902.