

Tuesday, March 4, 2025

TO: Brian Feldman, Chair of the Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee; and Committee Members

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

POSITION: Support SB 635 Wildlife - Protections and Highway Crossings

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports SB 635 offered by Senators Lewis Young and Rosapepe. SB 635 seeks to formalize the Maryland Connectivity Coalition to collaborate with the State Highway Administration (SHA) and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to identify and advance priority wildlife crossing projects. The intent is to reduce road impacts on imperiled species and reduce wildlife vehicle collision risks for motorists.

The bill also creates a Wildlife Highway Crossings Fund to support wildlife crossing projects and the research needed to determine the most strategic locations for crossings. SB 635 aims to incorporate wildlife movement and habitat connectivity into counties and municipalities' comprehensive land use plans and provide local governments with updated information on state connectivity plans. It also places emphasis on education and outreach regarding wildlife collisions and the importance of habitat connectivity. By addressing the high number of animal-vehicle collisions, SB 635 moves Maryland toward a safer future for both people and wildlife.

Many species in Maryland can benefit from less expensive wildlife crossing solutions, such as underpasses that can often be 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 under 2 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 – we must all do our part to find solutions that safeguard biodiversity. TNC commends Senators Lewis Young and Rosapepe 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 635.