



THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

SPONSOR TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB0731
(WILDLIFE - PROTECTIONS AND HIGHWAY CROSSINGS)

Delegate Sheila Ruth
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Our roads are important to us. They connect us to each other, our jobs, the necessities we need to live our lives, and enable us to travel more efficiently. However, they also unfortunately create a significant and dangerous barrier for Maryland's wildlife. Roads separate animals from their habitats and force them to make life-threatening crossings in search of food, shelter, and mates. As Maryland's human population continues to increase and roadways are expanded, natural habitats are being irreparably altered. Native wildlife is being isolated which puts their ability to survive at risk. The Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) identifies 526 native species as endangered, many of which face additional stress due to habitat fragmentation caused by our growing road network.

However, it is important to remember that the heightened risk of wildlife-vehicle collisions this problem causes does not only harm our wildlife, but our human drivers as well. In Maryland, wildlife-vehicle collisions, specifically with deer, represent a steep economic cost to the state. In 2023, the cost of an insurance claim from a deer collision averaged \$6,183.63, according to a [2024 report from the Maryland Insurance Administration](#) (MIA). Given that more than 31,000 deer-vehicle collisions occur in Maryland per year, this represents a cost to the state's insurance companies of almost \$200 million annually. According to the MIA report, these costs will be passed on to the policy holders in the form of increased premiums.

The Virginia Department of Transportation estimates that the total costs of collision rise to upwards of \$40,000 after adding in medical costs, missed work, and removal of animal carcasses. Unfortunately there can be worse outcomes, not only for the animals but for the humans involved in such collisions: in the ten years from 2012-2022, 14 people were killed in Maryland in crashes with deer. These undue economic and life costs can be significantly reduced with wildlife crossings such as those envisioned in HB731.

Wildlife overpasses, underpasses, and exclusionary fencing reduce the probability of wildlife-vehicle collisions. These infrastructure designs allow animals to cross roads safely. Our neighbors in Virginia found that installing exclusionary fencing to direct wildlife to two existing underpasses [reduced deer-vehicle collisions at those sites by 92%, saving over \\$2.3 million per site over the 25 year lifetime of the fencing.](#)

These crossings can also connect the divided habitats of endangered species - divisions that further imperil their chances of survival - by enabling them to cross in search of food or mates. This habitat connectivity provides both economic and intangible benefits to the state.

In 2024, the State Highway Administration (SHA), working with DNR, submitted an application for the federal Wildlife Crossings Pilot Program. The application was successful and SHA was awarded a grant of \$387,424 to develop a comprehensive plan for reducing wildlife vehicle collisions, including mapping hot spots and high risk areas. Although the grants under this program have been placed on hold pending review by the new presidential administration, we are hopeful that the administration will recognize the cost-saving value of this program and allow the grant funding to continue.

HB731 focuses on laying the groundwork to prepare for progress in developing wildlife crossings and furthering habitat connectivity. The bill would take several steps to do so.

It would direct the creation of:

- a Maryland Connectivity Coalition, established by DNR and SHA, that would foster collaboration and facilitate the sharing of resources, data, and expertise relating to wildlife habitat connectivity. The Coalition will consist of legislators and representatives of federal and state agencies, non-governmental organizations, and other stakeholders identified by DNR and SHA. The role of the coalition would be advisory and SHA would have final decision-making authority over the placement, funding, and design of wildlife crossings.
- a Wildlife Connectivity Fund to be used for protecting both endangered species whose habitats intersect with highways and motorists and wildlife from wildlife-vehicle collisions.
- a portal established by DNR for donations to the fund, which would collaborate (if feasible) with the Maryland Motor Vehicle Administration to provide an option on the vehicle registration portal to donate to the fund.

It would also establish:

- that funds may be transferred from the Wildlife Connectivity Fund to the Transportation Trust Fund.
- transparency and reporting requirements on wildlife crossings planned and in progress, Transportation Trust Fund expenditures, and measurable outcomes.
- land use guidelines by requiring charter counties and local jurisdictions to consider wildlife movement and habitat connectivity when developing their comprehensive plans. The Maryland Department of Planning would work with SHA and DNR to provide information on habitat connectivity concerns and planned wildlife crossings to the counties and local jurisdictions.

HB731 lays a strong foundation that Maryland can build on to protect wildlife and motorists, prevent wildlife-vehicle collisions, and save money for our state and its people. I ask for a favorable report.