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BUILDING CALIFORNIA'S FIRST FREEWAY WILDLIFE CROSSING

Tab 22

Project Briefing January 2021: 101 Freeway Wildlife Crossing at Liberty Canyon

Overview

The wildlife crossing at Liberty Canyon responds to more than two decades of National Park Service and other research on the conservation needs of the Los Angeles area's mountain lions and ecosystems, and advances long-standing local efforts to establish habitat connectivity for wildlife across the 101 Freeway. The preservation of this key wildlife linkage also spans over thirty years of protecting vital habitat by groups like the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been dedicated to acquiring and preserving open space in the Santa Monica Mountains over almost half a century and the wildlife crossing provides a critical last step in the historical effort of preservation that will help re-establish connectivity and ensure the future ecological health of an entire region.

"*Nature doesn't work without connection*," said author Mary Ellen Hannibal, and the science is now clear that wildlife need large landscape connectivity in order to have a future. This visionary structure will preserve biodiversity across the region by re-connecting an integral wildlife corridor, and most critically, help save a threatened local population of mountain lions from extinction. When complete, the crossing will be the largest in the world, the first of its kind in California, and will serve as a global model for urban wildlife conservation.

Saving the Mountain Lions of the Los Angeles Area

For nearly twenty years, the [National Park Service has conducted research](#) on the conservation needs of the Southern California cougar population and other wildlife. The wildlife crossing at Liberty Canyon is based on conclusive findings and an identified need to connect the open spaces that have been preserved through local community efforts over three decades. The Santa Monica Mountains to the Sierra Madre Range is one of the few coastal inland connections remaining in Southern California and has been identified as a critical corridor in multiple research and planning efforts in order to preserve biodiversity in the region, and ensure ecosystem resiliency given increasing impacts from challenges like climate change and urban development. The South Coast Wildlands 2008 whitepaper and the California Department of Fish & Wildlife 2010 California Essential Habitat Connectivity Project have both identified the need to preserve and enhance this critical linkage, "*as one of the highest priority linkages to conserve in order to sustain ecological and evolutionary processes*" in California's South Coast Ecoregion. A [crossing site assessment](#) by experts from across the world was released in 2018 that reviewed potential sites along the 101 Freeway as part of a linkage analysis—the experts agreed the Liberty Canyon location was the best option to reconnect this vital corridor and an overpass the best solution. Most critically, [ongoing wildlife research indicates](#) that if we do not act soon to help wildlife overcome the freeway barrier, the local cougar population will likely be decimated due to a lack of genetic diversity.

The Liberty Wildlife Corridor Partners

The wildlife crossing at Liberty Canyon is a public-private partnership of monumental scope, leveraging the capacity, expertise, and leadership of dozens of organizations and institutions from the public and private sectors. The five organizations who serve as the Liberty Wildlife Corridor Partners are: [National Wildlife Federation](#) (NWF), [California Department of Transportation](#) (Caltrans), [Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy](#) (SMMC) & Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, [National Park Service](#) (NPS), and the [Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains](#) (RCDSMM). An Executive Team with representatives from SMMC, NWF, and Caltrans serve as the leadership for the partners. Representatives from Senator Henry Stern and Assemblymember Richard Bloom's offices attend the partner meetings, along with retired Senator Fran Pavley. In addition, the partners and the Caltrans project team are working with a group of crossing experts from across the world, including [Living Habitats](#), [ARC—Animal Road Crossings](#), [The Western Transportation Institute](#), the [Road Ecology Center at UC Davis](#), and more.

Overwhelming Enthusiasm & Public Support for the Project

The public support for this wildlife crossing has proven unprecedented. A total of 8,859 comments were received in response to the draft Environmental Document, with only 15 opposed. Support for this wildlife crossing also extends around the world—people around the country and across the globe have made donations to the project and taken action to urge for its completion. International media outlets such as [AP News](#), [BBC World News](#), [Wall Street Journal](#), [NPR](#), [Marketplace](#), [The Guardian](#), [National Geographic](#), [The New Yorker](#), [CBS This Morning](#), [Los Angeles Times](#) and many more have featured the story of the crossing—***the project has received over a billion media impressions globally.***

Project Status

The wildlife crossing at Liberty Canyon is currently in phase 3 of 4, and if fundraising efforts remain on track, is scheduled to break ground in fall of 2021. The project team [released new visualizations of the crossing design](#) in the fall of 2020.

Phase	Status
1: Feasibility Study: \$250,000	FUNDED & COMPLETED 2015. Grant from SMMC/MRCA
2: Environmental Assessment: \$1.2 million	FUNDED & COMPLETED 2018. Grant from SCC
3: Final Design and Engineering \$8.7 million	IN PROCESS. \$7 million raised to date
4: Construction: Estimated cost \$55-\$78 million.	SCHEDULED FALL OF 2021. Pending funding. \$5 million raised to date. Estimate will become firmer when Caltrans completes the final design specifications, and the project team is actively working with experts to reduce costs wherever possible.

An Urgent Need: Our Next Steps

The National Wildlife Federation serves as the national conservation partner for the crossing for education, outreach, advocacy, and public and private philanthropy [with its #SaveLACougars campaign](#). **Through this campaign, NWF has committed to partnering with philanthropists, foundations, corporations and public agencies to secure the funds needed to complete this project—it is being funded 100% from this philanthropic effort.** Operating for over 80 years, NWF is one of the United States' largest and most influential non-profit wildlife conservation organizations with more than 6 million members and supporters across the country, an annual budget of over \$100 million, and a successful track record of large scale conservation work, such as multi-million dollar large scale projects in the Great Lakes, Chesapeake Bay, and the Gulf Coast.

With the help of our partners, the #SaveLACougars campaign to date has raised \$18 million from almost 3,000 individual donors from around the world—contributions have come from places such as Hong Kong, London, Kansas and Florida. Significant supporters of the project already include the Annenberg Foundation, Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation, CA State Coastal Conservancy, Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, California Department of Fish & Wildlife, and many more. In August of 2020, the Wildlife Conservation Board of California granted the project \$5 million for construction.

Securing the remaining funds enables the project to break ground in fall of 2021, and as a green infrastructure project, it offers an economic stimulus that provides jobs and other benefits to the state's economy. **The need to ensure keeping the target start date is also critical as the local mountain population is running out of time.** [One study released last March](#) reaffirmed the importance of the project, noting that the Southern California mountain lion population is nearing an "extinction vortex." In April of this year, [the California Fish and Game Commission unanimously voted to advance the petition](#) by the Center for Biological Diversity and the Mountain Lion Foundation to declare this population of cougars as threatened under the state's Endangered Species Act for final consideration.

In September of 2020, the National Park Service [announced an alarming discovery](#) that further underscored the critical and urgent need for the wildlife crossing—the first physical abnormalities linked to an inbreeding depression in the area mountain lions. "This is something we hoped to never see," said wildlife biologist Jeff Sikich. "We knew that genetic diversity was low here, but this is the first time we have actually seen physical evidence of it. This grave discovery underscores the need for measures to better support this population."