

July 25, 2023

Secretary Pete Buttigieg
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Ave, SE
Washington, DC 20590

Subject: Support for the 2023 Wildlife Crossing Pilot Program Application for US 160 Critical Wildlife Connectivity Corridor

Dear Secretary Buttigieg,

We, the undersigned organizations, write to you on behalf of tens of thousands of Colorado's hunters, anglers, and other conservationists and outdoor enthusiasts to express our support for the US 160 Critical Wildlife Connectivity Corridor project (Wildlife Connectivity Project), located near the Southern Ute Indian Tribe (SUIT) reservation in western Colorado. This project is a collaborative effort between the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) and La Plata County and is critical to enhancing safety measures and prioritizing ecological preservation.

The San Juan Basin in Southwestern Colorado is home to two of the largest migratory mule deer and elk herds in the state. Unfortunately for both the herds themselves and Colorado's traveling public, US 160 is the only primary east-west access route to Durango and Southwestern Colorado. It is this rural region's version of an interstate, and it bisects the migration route for these San Juan Basin herds. As a result, wildlife-vehicle collisions (WVCs) account for over three-quarters of crashes along the US 160 corridor and up to 80% of all crashes in some highway segments.

To address this, the Wildlife Connectivity Project employs a comprehensive system approach, installing fencing and underpasses, and innovative technological solutions. For example, Wildlife Detection Systems will be added along the highway to alert drivers to potential wildlife movement on or around the roadway. The goals of the project are to improve safety through a contiguous section to help "close the gap" in wildlife connectivity; reduce WVCs; and improve safety for travelers.

This corridor is crucial for maintaining the viability of the San Juan Basin herds. Recent declines in mule deer and elk populations in western Colorado highlight the importance of preserving herd health, size, and migratory movements within the project limits. By facilitating necessary migrations, this project serves as a step towards restoring habitat connectivity and reversing troubling trends. In 2006, CDOT's planners and engineers approved designs for 20 large mammal crossing structures for US 160 between Durango and Bayfield, yet in the last 16 years only 1 of these 20 crossing structures has been constructed. The reason, of course, is a lack of funding.

In the meantime, the number of WVCs and deer and elk carcasses continue to accumulate on US 160. State patrol reports nearly 100 WVCs per year on the 50-mile segment between Durango and Pagosa, and CDOT's maintenance crews report about twice that number. In the 16 years since the designs for the 20 crossing structures were approved, around 3,000 deer and elk have perished on US 160 between Durango and Pagosa. Tragically, there have also been 3 human fatalities on this highway segment during this same time period.

The area around US 160 in Southwestern Colorado is expected to see substantial population growth, which will continue to increase collision risks between wildlife and vehicles. This Wildlife Connectivity Project will complete CDOT's strategic plan to fully separate vehicle traffic from wildlife movements through mitigation measures proven elsewhere in Colorado, as well as new pilot technology. The project will restore habitat connectivity and create safer, more sustainable infrastructure for both humans and wildlife. We appreciate your consideration of our application support letter and look forward to your support of getting this important work on US 160 funded and completed.

Sincerely,

Colorado Wildlife Conservation Project organizational members:

<u>Backcountry Hunters & Anglers</u>	<u>Colorado Wildlife Federation</u>
<u>Colorado Bowhunters Association</u>	<u>Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation</u>
<u>Colorado Outfitters Association</u>	<u>Keep Routt Wild</u>
<u>Coloradans for Responsible Wildlife Management</u>	<u>Mule Deer Foundation</u>
<u>Colorado State Chapter – National Wild Turkey Federation</u>	<u>Muley Fanatic Foundation</u>
<u>Colorado State Muzzle Loading Association</u>	<u>National Wildlife Federation</u>
<u>Colorado Trappers & Predator Hunters Association</u>	<u>Rocky Mountain Big Game Recovery</u>
	<u>Safari Club International</u>
	<u>Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership</u>

The Colorado Wildlife Conservation Project is an alliance of diverse wildlife organizations with a common interest in conserving wildlife and wildlife habitats, and in preserving our hunting, angling, and conservation heritage. We are steadfast in our efforts to continue the state's long history of responsible, science-based wildlife management. Learn more about us at our website: <https://www.cowildlifeconservationproject.org/>