

ODOT Invests In Wildlife Crossing

How do you get wildlife to cross a highway safely? Build an under-crossing, that's how.

In a first-of-its-kind investment in motorist safety, ODOT is building a wildlife under-crossing on US 97, just south of Bend. In fact, ODOT is investing in two such under-crossings as part of a construction project to bring two new northbound lanes to the busy highway in Central Oregon.

Each year, ODOT records a dozen serious collisions with deer on that stretch of highway and many more unfortunate deer are found by the side of the highway and removed. Given this number of collisions with deer, ODOT designers teamed up with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and the US Forest Service to devise a plan to keep drivers safer by diverting deer and elk from the highway.

Traffic volume on this stretch of US97 has more than doubled in the past ten years, from about 10-thousand cars per day in the mid-1990's, to over 26-thousand per day during the height of summer. Those motorists find themselves sharing the lanes with deer herds, migrating in the Spring and Fall...and it's a losing proposition for both.



The result of the agency collaboration is a plan that's underway to build the two under-crossings and erect an 8-foot tall fence line on both sides of the highway from one end of the project to the other, about four miles. Biologists plan to make the under-crossings "deer friendly" by baiting the structures with salt, trees and shrubs to attract the animals with food sources and cover to help them feel isolated from the highway.

One of the under-crossings will be "animal only", for deer and the rare elk that migrates across the highway. The other will be for cars and animals...with the expectation that the deer will cross at dusk and dawn when few, if any, vehicles are in the area. The idea of mingling a vehicle crossing and a deer crossing is new, but Forest Service Biologist Sandra Jacobson says "if we can combine both human traffic and animal movement, then we can make more opportunities for animals to cross highways...and if we can figure that out, we're making some major progress."

There's also a plan afoot to install diversion devices on the on and off ramps to prevent access to wildlife where vehicles enter and exit the highway.

Funding for the entire highway project is about \$20 million, nearly \$12 million of which has been provided by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). About \$1.5 million has been set aside for the fencing, bridge building and re-vegetation of the under-crossings. US Forest Service analysis shows that such an investment will return a cash equivalent of \$1.85 per \$1 spent in terms of reduced collisions and motorist injury.

In the end, the combined agency decision is that the likelihood that the fence can reduce crashes and injuries is high...and motorists along Central Oregon busiest highway will be safer with its installation.