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Organization: WA State Dept of Transportation

Title: Region Administrator

Comments: Dear Forest Supervisor,

On behalf of the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT), I am writing to express our strong support for the U.S. Forest Service's (USFS) proposed permanent area closures adjacent to the wildlife crossing structures within the I-90 Snoqualmie Pass East Project corridor. As long-standing partners, WSDOT and the USFS have shared a visionary goal: to make Interstate 90 safer for drivers while reconnecting fragmented ecosystems for Washington's wildlife.

WSDOT has invested significant public resources into designing and constructing world-class wildlife overpasses, underpasses and exclusion fence along this corridor. The success of these structures; however, depends on wildlife feeling secure enough to approach and utilize them. Substantial scientific research and monitoring indicate that human disturbance, including dispersed recreation, winter sports, and unauthorized trail use near the structure approaches can severely deter wildlife use. For example: a bridge on I-90, west of the project, saw human activity increase by a factor of 10, corresponding with a nearly 90 percent reduction in use of the bridge by wildlife.

To that end, the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FHWA 2008) states, "WSDOT and the USFS agree that managing [human] use near the wildlife crossing structures will be important to assuring their success... [and] USFS enforcement practices may include Area Closure Orders, as necessary, to prohibit certain uses in these areas." The proposed USFS closure is a critical management tool to protect these investments and ensure the ecological integrity of the corridor. Specifically, WSDOT supports these closures for the following reasons:

*Enhancing Public Safety: When wildlife successfully utilize designated crossings rather than attempting to breach the wildlife exclusion fencing and/or cross the interstate lanes, the risk of wildlife-vehicle collisions (WVCs) decreases dramatically, protecting the traveling public. USFS has implemented emergency area closures since completion of the first half of the I-90 Project. During that time, the combination of area closures, wildlife crossings, and exclusion fence has reduced WVCs by approximately 80 percent.

*Maximizing Conservation Effectiveness: As noted above, data strongly suggest restricting human presence in the vicinity of the crossings increases their effectiveness for wildlife connectivity - a primary objective of the project. The area closure will ensure public funds successfully fulfill their stated purpose to the greatest extent feasible.

WSDOT is fully committed to collaborating with the USFS on implementation of these closures. We are ready to assist with joint public education efforts and coordinated monitoring to ensure the public understands that protecting these zones directly contributes to a safer highway and a healthier ecosystem.

Thank you for your continued leadership and partnership in safeguarding this vital ecological corridor. We urge the USFS to move forward with the proposed closure order as drafted.