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Committee: Education, Energy and the Environment
Testimony on: SB 902 Wildlife – Protections and Highway Crossings
Position: Support
Hearing Date: February 27, 2024

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club supports SB 902, which will reduce deer-vehicle collisions and protect rare, threatened, and endangered wildlife from becoming roadkill. Among its provisions, the bill requires the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the State Highway Administration (SHA) to improve passageways – such as culverts -- under roads, allowing our wildlife to conduct their natural movements without risk of mortality from vehicle traffic.

In addition to requiring agencies to identify areas where vehicle collisions with deer could be reduced, the bill requires DNR and SHA to prioritize reptiles and amphibians, such as turtles and salamanders, which are especially vulnerable to vehicle collisions because they are slow-moving. Drivers instinctively stop or swerve to avoid hitting these animals. The results range from fender-benders to multi-car collisions. Last May, a turtle crossing in Florida caused an accident damaging seven vehicles.

Road mortality is one of the greatest contributors to declines in North American freshwater turtles. In a Maine study, more than 50 percent of all roadkill animals were turtles, frogs, and salamanders. Overall, turtle populations in the eastern U.S. have suffered a 10 to 20 percent loss from road kills alone. Females are especially vulnerable because they travel further than males and move more slowly while carrying 8-10 eggs. Many turtles don't reach reproductive age until about 15 years old, so losing one mature female is a large loss to the future population.

In Maryland, five of our 18 turtle species suffer significant mortality due to vehicle strikes, including the diamond-backed terrapin, the state reptile and mascot of the University of Maryland College Park (found on both sides of the Bay and along the coast). Vehicle collisions significantly impact four others: the wood turtle (a state-ranked vulnerable species found from the western shore of Bay to Garrett County), the northern map turtle (in Harford and Cecil Counties), and the statewide painted turtle and the eastern box turtle.

Fortunately, SHA has demonstrated a commendable ability to create wildlife passageways under major roads. In 2012, the SHA received a federal DOT Environmental Toolkit Award for an

“Exemplary Ecosystems Initiative,” citing innovative culverts under the Intercounty Connector (ICC). These culverts are utilized by a range of wildlife, including deer, raccoons, opossums, squirrels, and foxes, as well as turtles. The ICC’s fencing directs wildlife to these culverts and limits their access to the roadway. Because they usually follow waterways, turtles and salamanders only require updates of existing pipes that already channel streams under roadways.

In addition to protecting Maryland’s turtles from vehicle traffic, the improved stream culverts will also help our brook trout, even though they aren’t targeted in the legislation. Brook trout are treasured by Marylanders who enjoy fishing but are a vulnerable/watchlist species in the state. In the course of foraging and reproducing, they need to swim both upstream and downstream in creeks channeled under roadways, where current culverts often do not allow upstream passage.

The brook trout’s range overlaps with that of the wood turtle, an imperiled state-rare species, so protecting one can help protect the other. A recent study in New York and Connecticut showed that wood turtles “commonly come in close proximity to the roads intersecting and bordering a stream corridor.” The study recommends that “measures that facilitate safe passage beneath roads should be implemented whenever roads are present near occupied wood turtle habitat.”

For all these reasons, the Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club supports SB 902 and encourages a favorable report.

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