

Testimony by

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Speaking on behalf of the Western Governors' Wildlife Council

Submitted to

**The United States House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources
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Chairman Grijalva, Ranking Member Bishop and members of the Committee, my name is John Harja. I am the Director of Public Lands Policy Coordination in the Office of Utah Governor Jon M. Huntsman, Jr. I also serve as Chair of the Western Governors' Wildlife Council, an organization formed by the Western Governors' Association. The WGA addresses important policy and governance issues in the West, advances the role of the Western states in the federal system, and strengthens the social and economic fabric of the region. Thank you for the invitation to testify today on behalf of WGA concerning the *Wildlife Corridors Initiative* and the work of the Western Governors' Wildlife Council¹.

Background

In February 2007, the Western Governors' Association unanimously approved policy resolution 07-01, *Protecting Wildlife Migration Corridors and Crucial Wildlife Habitat in the West*². This resolution asked the Western states, in partnership with important stakeholders, to identify key wildlife corridors and crucial wildlife habitats in the West and make recommendations on needed policy options and tools for preserving those landscapes. WGA did this through the *Wildlife Corridors Initiative*, a multi-state, collaborative effort to assess current data for wildlife corridors and crucial habitat in the 19 Western states. In June 2008, the governors adopted the report³, *Wildlife Corridors Initiative*, which included recommendations on data needs and conservation tools developed through a stakeholder-based process.

The Governors acknowledged that large, intact and functioning ecosystems, healthy fish and wildlife populations, and public access to natural landscapes contribute to the West's quality of life and economic well-being. Unfortunately, human activity occurring in important wildlife

¹ www.westgov.org

² <http://www.westgov.org/wga/policy/07/wildlife-corridors07-01.pdf>

³ <http://www.westgov.org/wga/publicat/wildlife08.pdf>

corridors and crucial wildlife habitats can affect the integrity of these ecosystems around the nation and in the Western States.

Western Governors' Wildlife Council

In June 2008 the Western Governors established the Western Governors' Wildlife Council to implement recommendations in the report. The primary task is to identify key wildlife corridors and crucial wildlife habitats in the West, and to coordinate implementation of needed policy options and tools for preserving those landscapes.

The Council is generally tasked to address the following needs identified in the development of the report:

- Much information is missing, or more detailed information is desirable, concerning wildlife corridors and crucial habitats.
- Crucial habitat and wildlife corridors are defined differently, and used for different purposes, in the various states. These issues need to be examined and reconciled, to meet the common goal of aiding wildlife conservation efforts
- States must have a credible set of tools and models for incorporating wildlife values into planning and decision-making processes.
- There must be coordination across all levels of government for conservation of wildlife corridors and crucial habitat.
- States require long-term, sustained funding for wildlife conservation objectives that support current and future decision-making in a dynamic landscape. State wildlife agencies are funded primarily by revenues from fishing and hunting, federal distributions and lottery dollars; these revenues limit their capacity to engage actively in conserving wildlife habitat and corridors. Several existing programs provide a foundation of information that can be built upon with a modest infusion of funds.

A key product of the Western Governors' Wildlife Council is the development of a spatially explicit Decisions Support System (DSS) that each state can use to make more informed decisions on protecting wildlife corridors and crucial habitats. This tool will build upon existing information and fill data gaps. The DSS will include GIS mapping data to bring consistency in the way corridors are mapped and crucial habitats identified across the West. It will also increase the integration of wildlife data into decision processes early on, by fostering more proactive planning and promoting research on adaptive resource management.

The DSS will be dynamic. There will be regular updates of data as landscapes and wildlife populations change as a result of the influence of population growth, energy development and climate change. Through this effort the DSS will support research to understand climate change impacts on wildlife corridors and crucial habitats and climate-change related adaptation.

For the last six months the Western Governors' Wildlife Council has been working on a pilot project to collect available wildlife data from relevant states, federal agencies and

nongovernmental organizations to apply crucial habitat information to the identification of developable renewable energy zones within WGA's Western Renewable Energy Zones initiative. Plans are also underway within the Western Governors' Wildlife Council to establish two standing committees to move forward on developing an integrated fish and wildlife DSS within each state and to achieve a coordinated understanding of wildlife corridors and connectivity issues.

Federal Partnerships

The WGA, through the Western Governors' Wildlife Council, is poised to coordinate efforts between the 16 state members of the Council to develop DSSs, while integrating federal partners and stakeholders into these efforts. Integrated DSSs in each state in the West will include all public lands, and consider current and future uses of adjoining lands. Early and frequent coordination between state and federal land managers and other agencies and stakeholders will create the likelihood of positive results. Given the amount of public lands in the West, it will be critical for states to partner with federal agencies in developing DSSs to ensure data sharing and the ability for federal agencies to utilize the information in their own decision-making processes.

One wildlife corridor has already been designated on public lands as a result of data sharing between states, federal agencies and additional stakeholders. The Bridger-Teton National Forest amended its Land and Resource Management Plan to identify a wildlife corridor, known as the Path of the Pronghorn, and a management standard to ensure that no new projects or activities impede the migration corridor. This is one of the longest remaining land-based wildlife migrations in North America, and it is the longest in the lower 48 United States. A portion of this corridor also crosses Bureau of Land Management lands in Wyoming. A recent revision of the Pinedale District Resource Management Plan protected a portion of the pronghorn migration on their lands by approving the designation of an Area of Critical Environmental Concern, designated Trappers Point.

State Needs

Each state will require funding to coordinate the development of their DSSs on a regional scale and fill data gaps within their state. Many states have begun this process, but they are in different stages of development. The Western Governors' Wildlife Council will soon be developing a framework for a coordinated DSS that will give each state the ability to create a scorecard, identifying their specific and individual needs. A portion of that money will also be needed to help states modify their wildlife management goals and plans as wildlife respond to impacts from climate change. Resources directed toward the federal agencies that would maximize their participation and support of the Western Governors' Wildlife Council should also be considered.

The Effects of Climate Change

The *Wildlife Corridors Initiative* report provided recommendations for identifying and maintaining wildlife corridors in the face of climate change. These recommendations include:

- Establish a Wildlife Adaptation Advisory Council among state and federal agencies, academics, and science-based NGOs to facilitate regional and state climate-impact assessments on the effects of climate change upon wildlife and wildlife habitat.
- Establish a regional climate change adaptation information clearinghouse relevant to wildlife corridors and crucial habitat.
- Implement flexible approaches to addressing habitat fragmentation on public lands and utilize incentives to encourage voluntary protection and management of key crucial habitats and wildlife corridors by private owners.
- Recommend coordination among western states, tribes and federal natural resource agencies in planning and implementing adaptation activities.
- Consider collaboration within hydrologic strategic planning, hydrologic climate modeling, water storage capacity and state invasive species strategies.

The *Wildlife Corridors Initiative* additionally suggests that the Western Governors should consider supporting the establishment of new revenue streams to support wildlife adaptation to climate change in any relevant climate change legislation, such as carbon cap and trade or carbon tax legislation that may be enacted by the U.S. Congress.

Conclusion

In closing, the WGWC is moving ahead quickly with establishing a dynamic DSS in each state. Each DSS will be designed to coordinate the collection of information concerning crucial habitat and wildlife corridors, and design a process within each state which provides this information to state, local and federal decision makers. Our effort is to encourage early consideration of wildlife data in planning decisions and to help assist decision-makers to better manage wildlife resources. It is this last step which is vital. Wildlife and plant species live on private, state and federal land, and any process to protect them must involve partnerships. No one entity can accomplish the task alone. We would appreciate any support this committee and Congress is able to offer through funding or by encouraging federal agency participation in this effort.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about the work WGA and the Western Governors' Wildlife Council are doing to map wildlife corridors and crucial habitat on public and private lands.