

## How Do You Get Wildlife to Cross a Highway...Safely? With an Undercrossing, of Course!



In a unique investment in motorist and wildlife safety, the ODOT Region 4 team is building a wildlife under-crossing on U.S. 97, just south of Bend. In fact, ODOT is investing in two such under-crossings as part of a construction project to add 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 and removed from the side of the highway. Given this number of vehicle vs. deer collisions, ODOT designers teamed up with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and the U.S. Forest Service to devise a plan to keep drivers safe by diverting deer and elk from the highway.

### **Traffic Volume Doubles**

Traffic volume on this stretch of U.S. 97 has more than doubled in the past ten years, from about 10,000 vehicles per day in the mid-1990s, to over 26,000 per day during the height of summer. Those motorists find themselves sharing the lanes with deer herds, migrating in the spring and fall. It's a losing proposition for both.

The result of the agency collaboration is a plan to build the two under-crossings and erect a four mile eight-foot tall fence on both sides of the highway. Biologists will 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 occasional elk that migrate 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 has great potential.

### **More Opportunities for Animal Crossings**

"If we can combine both human traffic and animal movement, then we can make more opportunities for animals to cross highways," said Forest Service Biologist Sandra Jacobson.

"And if we can figure that out, we're making some major progress."

There's also a plan to install diversion devices at 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. About \$1.5 million has been set aside for the fencing, bridge building and re-vegetation of the under-crossings. U.S. Forest Service analysis shows that such an investment will return a cash equivalent of \$1.85 per \$1.00 spent in terms of reduced collisions and motorist injury. Saving lives, saving money: what a worthy effort!